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DisCrit, Discipline, and Special Education Teacher Preparation: A Systematic Review of Research on Preservice Teacher Implicit Bias and Student Behavior

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Abstract

Implicit bias can influence how preservice teachers interpret student behavior, particularly when race and disability intersect. This systematic literature review examines how implicit bias relates to preservice teachers' perceptions of student behavior and disciplinary decision-making, with particular attention to Black students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). Guided by Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), 12 peer-reviewed sources published between 2015 and 2025 were reviewed, including nine empirical studies and three conceptual or practitioner-focused publications. Findings revealed recurring themes concerning racialized interpretations of behavior, the role of teacher preparation in addressing bias, and the difficulty of translating awareness into changes in practice. The DisCrit analysis further highlighted how racism and ableism shape expectations of appropriate behavior and educational decision-making. Although reflective practices and equity-focused preparation offer opportunities to challenge bias, evidence of sustained changes in disciplinary decisions remains limited. These findings suggest that teacher preparation programs must move beyond recognizing bias and better prepare future educators to challenge assumptions and institutional practices that contribute to inequitable disciplinary outcomes.

Keywords: preservice teachers, implicit bias, race, disability, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, DisCrit

Racial disparities in school discipline remain a persistent concern within the United States education system, particularly for Black students who experience disproportionate rates of disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and other exclusionary responses (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). These disparities are especially concerning for Black boys identified with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD), whose educational experiences may be shaped by assumptions related to both race and disability (Hancock et al., 2021; Urbani et al., 2022). Understanding these disparities requires attention not only to student behavior but also to how educators interpret that behavior and determine which responses are appropriate.

Research examining teacher judgments suggests that racial assumptions can influence how student behavior is perceived, labeled, and addressed (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). These judgments matter because teachers make decisions about whether behavior reflects intentional misconduct, a disability-related need, or circumstances that require additional support. Implicit bias can shape these interpretations, even when educators believe they are making fair and objective decisions (Chiu et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2022). Consequently, disciplinary inequities may emerge not only from differences in student conduct but also from the assumptions educators bring to the decision-making process.

An important concern in the literature is determining when and how these assumptions influence disciplinary decisions. Studies using behavioral scenarios and measures of implicit attitudes have provided insight into racialized expectations and teacher judgments (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). However, fewer studies directly examine whether teachers select different interventions when the same behavior is presented with

different racial cues. This distinction is important because identifying bias in attitudes or perceptions does not necessarily establish how that bias influences actual classroom responses. Additional research is needed to examine the relationship between behavioral interpretation, intervention selection, and the reasoning educators use to justify their decisions (Chiu et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2022; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

These concerns are particularly relevant to preservice teacher preparation because future educators begin developing professional beliefs, expectations, and decision-making practices before entering their own classrooms. Implicit bias refers to attitudes or associations that may influence perceptions and judgments without deliberate awareness (Stephens et al., 2022). Although these associations do not determine every decision an educator makes, they raise questions about whether teacher preparation programs provide sufficient opportunities to examine assumptions about race, disability, and behavior. Addressing these questions requires attention to individual beliefs as well as the institutional practices that shape how educators are prepared to work with students who have historically experienced inequitable treatment (Chiu et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2021; Urbani et al., 2022).

Preservice Teachers and Implicit Bias

Preservice teachers occupy an important position in efforts to address racial disparities in school discipline because teacher preparation programs influence how future educators understand student behavior and develop their professional practices (Hancock et al., 2021; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). During preparation, teacher candidates encounter instructional approaches, classroom management expectations, and professional norms that may either reinforce existing assumptions or encourage them to question those assumptions (Chiu et al., 2022; Urbani et al., 2022). When behavior is interpreted through racialized or ableist

expectations, educators may overlook contextual factors and respond in ways that contribute to inequitable outcomes (Hancock et al., 2021; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Teacher preparation therefore provides an opportunity to examine these patterns before they become established professional practices. One approach involves introducing Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), which examines how racism and ableism work together to shape educational experiences and institutional practices (Annamma et al., 2013). Rather than focusing exclusively on individual attitudes, a DisCrit-informed approach encourages preservice teachers to question how educational expectations are established, whose behavior is considered appropriate, and how those expectations may influence disciplinary decisions.

Positionality

I come to this work as a thirty-six-year-old Black man who has moved through both education and healthcare systems, often in spaces where people who look like me are underrepresented. Those experiences are not separate from this research. They shape how I see, question, and interpret the ways student behavior is understood and responded to, especially for Black students labeled with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders.

Being in these spaces has made me more aware of how quickly behavior can be interpreted through racialized and ableist lenses, and how those interpretations can lead to very different outcomes. I have seen how decisions that are framed as neutral or professional are often influenced by assumptions that are not always acknowledged. Because of that, I do not approach this topic as distant or neutral. I approach it with an awareness that these systems have real consequences for students and families, particularly those who are already marginalized.

My commitment to this work is rooted in a desire for equity, but also in a responsibility to name and challenge the patterns I continue to see. Using a DisCrit lens allows me to think

more intentionally about how race and disability intersect in teacher decision-making, and why it is important to center the experiences of those most affected by these systems.

At the same time, I recognize that my own experiences shape what I notice and how I make meaning of the research. Rather than trying to remove that, I acknowledge it. My goal is not to claim neutrality, but to be transparent about the perspective I bring and to use it to more critically examine how inequities are produced and maintained within teacher preparation and disciplinary practices.

DisCrit and Special Education Teacher Preparation

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) provides an important framework for examining how racism and ableism intersect within educational systems. DisCrit emerged from the integration of Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies in Education as scholars sought to better understand how systems of oppression simultaneously shape the educational experiences of students of color with disabilities (Connor et al., 2016). The DisCrit framework is built upon seven foundational tenets that guide its application in educational research and teacher preparation.

DisCrit Tenet 1

DisCrit focuses on the ways that racism and ableism operate together to uphold socially constructed notions of normalcy. What schools define as “normal” behavior is often based on White, nondisabled norms (Connor et al., 2016). Research included in this review supports this idea. Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) found that preservice teachers interpreted identical behaviors as more severe when the student was identified as Black.

DisCrit Tenet 2

DisCrit values multidimensional identities rather than reducing people to singular categories. Students do not experience race and disability separately but as intersecting identities (Connor et al., 2016). Chiu et al. (2022) found that preservice teachers often struggled to separate racial assumptions from disability interpretations when evaluating behavior.

DisCrit Tenet 3

DisCrit emphasizes the social construction of race and ability. Categories such as race and disability are not merely biological categories; they are also socially constructed classifications that shape how individuals are treated in institutions such as schools (Connor et al., 2016). Enders et al. (2022) demonstrated that preservice teachers' interpretations of behavior influenced Functional Behavior Assessment decisions.

DisCrit Tenet 4

DisCrit privileges the voices of marginalized populations. Rather than focusing solely on clinical descriptions of behavior, DisCrit encourages educators to consider the lived experiences of individuals affected by disciplinary inequities (Connor et al., 2016). Lavin and Goodman (2023) found that reflective journaling provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to critically examine their assumptions about disability and culture.

DisCrit Tenet 5

DisCrit considers the historical and legal contexts shaping race and disability in education. The overrepresentation of students of color in special education must be considered alongside historical patterns of segregation and exclusion (Connor et al., 2016). Research examining disciplinary decisions suggests that these patterns continue through contemporary teacher interpretations of behavior (Chiu et al., 2022).

DisCrit Tenet 6

DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and ability as forms of property that grant social advantage. Students perceived as White or nondisabled often receive greater benefit of the doubt when their behavior is interpreted by educators (Connor et al., 2016). Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) found that preservice teachers were significantly more likely to predict repeated misbehavior when the student described was Black rather than White.

DisCrit Tenet 7

DisCrit emphasizes activism and a commitment to social justice. It calls for educational research and practice that actively challenges inequitable systems (Connor et al., 2016). Studies examining teacher preparation programs demonstrate that structured reflection, equity-focused training, and critical discussions of race and disability can help preservice teachers recognize and challenge inequitable disciplinary practices (Breese et al., 2023; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Urbani et al., 2022).

In special education teacher preparation, DisCrit offers a framework for critical reflection (Chiu et al., 2022). Historically, some approaches to teacher training have emphasized medical models focused on “fixing” student behavior. DisCrit-oriented pedagogy broadens this perspective by helping preservice teachers examine how perceptions of aggression, defiance, and misbehavior may be shaped by racial and disability stereotypes (Hancock et al., 2021; Perouse-Harvey, 2022). Integrating DisCrit into teacher preparation can support preservice teachers in questioning exclusionary norms they encounter during field placements and advocating for supportive rather than punitive educational practices.

The literature also emphasizes the role of educator decision-making in disciplinary outcomes (Enders et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). Teachers often justify disciplinary responses by emphasizing classroom safety, maintaining

authority, or enforcing behavioral expectations. However, these justifications may reflect racialized assumptions when educators respond to Black students with EBD (Chiu et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2021; Urbani et al., 2022). When similar behaviors are attributed to White students, educators may be more likely to consider contextual factors, developmental considerations, or the need for additional support (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). Preparation programs should therefore move beyond awareness-only models toward approaches grounded in DisCrit Tenet 7 that encourage educators to challenge exclusionary norms (Connor et al., 2016; Ellis-Robinson, 2021). Future research should also test the application of Tenet 4 by examining whether incorporating counternarratives changes teachers' intervention selections (Connor et al., 2016; Lavin & Goodman, 2023). Together, these patterns highlight the need to examine how implicit bias may influence disciplinary decision-making and inequitable outcomes in schools.

The studies discussed in this review suggest that interpretations of student behavior may vary according to race. Studies examining behavioral expectations and labeling raise concerns about how Black students are perceived and how those perceptions may shape disciplinary responses (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). These findings suggest that disciplinary disparities cannot be understood solely through differences in student behavior. Rather, they reflect how behavior is interpreted within broader social and cultural contexts (Chiu et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2021; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Purpose of the Current Study

The goal of this systematic literature review is to examine how the implicit biases of preservice teachers influence their interpretations and disciplinary responses when working with

Black versus White students with EBD. While it is well documented that racialized interpretations of student behavior and disciplinary decision-making can emerge during teacher preparation, questions remain about the stages of decision-making at which these biases may emerge (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). By synthesizing 12 peer-reviewed sources, this review aims to clarify whether these disciplinary inequities stem from actual behavioral differences or from the underlying social interpretations held by educators during their training (Chiu et al., 2022; Breese et al., 2023). Furthermore, this review applies a DisCrit framework to identify which preparation strategies, such as reflective journaling, critical reflection modules, or structured professional development activities, may help challenge racialized associations and support more equitable intervention choices (Connor et al., 2016; Enders et al., 2022; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022).

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of published sources that examine DisCrit principles and implicit bias within special education teacher preparation with an emphasis on behavior?
- What are the overarching themes of published sources that examine DisCrit principles and implicit bias within special education teacher preparation with an emphasis on behavior?
- What are the tenets of DisCrit that are presented in published sources that focus on implicit bias within special education teacher preparation with an emphasis on behavior?

Method

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted between October and November 2025 to identify peer-reviewed journal articles addressing implicit bias related to race and disability within preservice teacher preparation, particularly in the context of student behavior, discipline, and behavioral intervention. Searches were conducted in ERIC and through EBSCOhost, with Google Scholar serving as a supplementary search source. Search terms included combinations of "preservice teacher," "teacher candidate," "implicit bias," "racial bias," "discipline," "behavior," "EBD," "emotional disturbance," "disability," "special education," and "DisCrit." Reference lists of potentially eligible articles were also examined to identify additional relevant publications.

The search included publications from 2015 through 2025 to capture research conducted during a period of increased attention to educational equity, disciplinary disproportionality, and culturally responsive teacher preparation. This period also allowed the review to examine contemporary approaches to understanding implicit bias and its relationship to teacher decision-making (Breese et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2022). Additional search terms, including "conduct disorder" and "behavior disorder," were considered to account for differences in terminology used to describe students with emotional and behavioral needs.

The initial search identified 490 records. The authors manually checked the records for duplicates before beginning the screening process. Following the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 12 peer-reviewed sources were retained for the final synthesis. Together, these sources examined implicit bias and teacher preparation through qualitative, quantitative, mixed

methods, conceptual, and practitioner-focused approaches, with particular attention to race, disability, and educational decision-making.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were evaluated using inclusion and exclusion criteria developed to identify literature examining implicit bias and educational decision-making within preservice teacher preparation. First, publications had to focus on preservice teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs or provide findings directly relevant to preservice teacher education. The review included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research, as well as conceptual and practitioner-focused publications, to capture both empirical evidence and theoretical or applied contributions to the field (Chiu et al., 2022; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). The qualitative studies generally explored teacher experiences, reflection, and meaning-making, while quantitative studies examined attitudes or judgments through structured measures. Mixed methods studies incorporated both approaches, and conceptual and practitioner-focused publications contributed perspectives on teacher preparation and educational equity.

Second, sources had to address students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD), emotional disturbance, or related behavioral needs, or examine educational contexts in which preservice teachers interpreted student behavior, conducted behavioral assessments, or considered disciplinary and supportive responses. For this review, behavioral decision-making included the interpretation of student conduct, judgments about behavior severity, the assignment of behavioral labels, and the selection of classroom management or behavioral interventions. Relevant examples included vignette-based evaluations, Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) activities, and other opportunities for preservice teachers to consider how student behavior

should be understood and addressed (Enders et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Third, sources had to examine implicit bias, racial bias, or underlying assumptions concerning race and disability. Particular attention was given to publications addressing how teachers interpret student behavior, make discipline-related judgments, or determine whether supportive or punitive interventions are appropriate. These decision-making processes were relevant because existing research has examined how racial assumptions may influence perceptions of behavior and the labels assigned to students (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Publications were excluded when they did not meaningfully address preservice teacher preparation, race or bias, disability-related educational experiences, or relevant behavioral decision-making contexts. Non-peer-reviewed sources were also excluded. Although the review primarily focused on preservice teachers, research that included practicing educators alongside teacher candidates was considered when its findings remained relevant to teacher preparation (Chiu et al., 2022).

The final review included 12 peer-reviewed sources. Based on the classifications presented in Table 1, nine were empirical studies and three were conceptual or practitioner-focused publications. This distinction was maintained throughout the synthesis to ensure that theoretical perspectives and practice recommendations were not presented as equivalent to empirical findings.

PRISMA-Guided Selection

The study selection process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). Searches conducted between October

and November 2025 identified 490 records through ERIC, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar. The authors manually checked the records for duplicates, resulting in the removal of 348 duplicate records. Following duplicate removal, 142 records remained for title and abstract screening.

The authors conducted the screening process using the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. During title and abstract screening, 102 records were excluded. Reasons for exclusion included an ineligible preservice teacher population ($n = 38$), insufficient focus on implicit bias or race ($n = 29$), and lack of relevance to emotional and behavioral needs ($n = 35$). After this stage, 40 articles remained for full-text eligibility assessment.

Of the 40 full-text articles assessed, 28 were excluded because they did not meet the review's eligibility criteria. Reasons included an ineligible population ($n = 8$), an ineligible demographic focus ($n = 7$), an ineligible educational or behavioral context ($n = 9$), and lack of peer review ($n = 4$). The qualitative synthesis therefore included 12 peer-reviewed sources.

The selection process is presented in Figure 1. The PRISMA flow diagram documents the number of records identified, duplicates removed, records screened, articles assessed for eligibility, and sources included in the final review. The same 12 sources informed the descriptive analysis, thematic synthesis, and examination of DisCrit tenets.

After selection, information was extracted from each source, including publication year, research design or publication type, participant characteristics, teacher preparation context, and key findings. Empirical studies were examined for their reported data and findings, while conceptual and practitioner-focused publications were considered for their theoretical and applied contributions.

A thematic approach was used to identify recurring patterns related to implicit bias, interpretations of student behavior, disciplinary decision-making, and teacher preparation. The

authors read and reread the sources to identify relevant concepts, which were then organized into broader themes. The seven tenets of DisCrit also informed the analysis by providing a framework for examining how race, disability, and institutional practices were represented across the literature (Connor et al., 2016).

Interrater Reliability

To strengthen the accuracy and consistency of the data extraction process and qualitative synthesis, the authors conducted an independent secondary review. Both reviewers independently examined the 12 sources in the final review. Each reviewer extracted information concerning participant demographics, methodological approaches, key findings, and evidence related to the seven tenets of DisCrit. The secondary reviewer completed the initial coding without access to the primary researcher's coding decisions, allowing both reviewers to independently identify patterns across the literature.

After completing their independent reviews, the authors compared their coding decisions and extracted information to identify areas of agreement and disagreement. Particular attention was given to the identification of DisCrit tenets, the interpretation of findings concerning race and disability, and the development of themes related to implicit bias and teacher preparation. Initial percentage agreement was calculated by dividing the number of matching coding decisions by the total number of coding decisions and multiplying by 100. The initial interrater agreement was 83%.

Disagreements were addressed through discussion and re-examination of the original sources. The authors revisited relevant passages and compared their interpretations until a shared coding decision was reached. This process allowed the reviewers to clarify the application of the DisCrit tenets and strengthen the consistency of the final thematic analysis.

The use of independent coding, percentage agreement, and discussion-based resolution provided an additional check on coding consistency. However, percentage agreement does not account for agreement occurring by chance and should therefore be interpreted as a descriptive measure of coding consistency rather than definitive evidence of reliability.

Results

The final review included 12 peer-reviewed sources published between 2015 and 2025. As presented in Table 1, nine sources were classified as empirical research, while three were conceptual or practitioner-focused publications. The empirical studies reported a combined total of 775 participants, although participant populations and sample sizes varied considerably across studies. Most of the research focused on preservice teachers, with Chiu et al. (2022) also including practicing special educators. The conceptual and practitioner-focused publications did not report participant samples and were therefore excluded from the participant total.

The included empirical studies used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches to examine implicit bias, teacher beliefs, behavioral judgments, and teacher preparation experiences (Breese et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). These methodological differences allowed the authors to examine bias through several forms of evidence. However, variation in research design, participant characteristics, and measurement approaches limited direct comparisons across the studies.

Demographic information was not consistently reported across the literature. Several studies included predominantly White preservice teachers, while others represented more racially and ethnically diverse populations (Breese et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). Gender was also inconsistently

reported, limiting the ability to summarize these characteristics across the full corpus. These differences are important because the demographic composition of teacher preparation programs may influence how race, disability, and student behavior are understood within educational settings.

The findings are presented in three areas: the characteristics of the included literature, the representation of DisCrit tenets, and the overarching themes identified through the qualitative synthesis. Together, these analyses examine how implicit bias is represented in preservice teacher preparation and what the literature suggests about efforts to address racialized and ableist interpretations of student behavior.

DisCrit Analysis

The 12 included sources were examined using the seven tenets of Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) to identify how race, disability, and educational inequity were represented across the literature. DisCrit provides a framework for examining how racism and ableism operate together within educational systems and influence the experiences of students with disabilities (Connor et al., 2016). The tenets served as an interpretive framework; sources were not required to explicitly identify or apply DisCrit. As shown in Table 2, several sources reflected more than one tenet, illustrating how different aspects of racism and ableism can operate together within teacher preparation and disciplinary decision-making.

Tenet 1, which examines how racism and ableism work together to construct ideas of normalcy, was the most frequently identified, appearing in six of the 12 sources (50%). These sources addressed how teacher expectations, educational practices, and assumptions about appropriate behavior can reinforce deficit-oriented understandings of students with disabilities (Breese et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2021; Kervick et al., 2025; Perouse-

Harvey, 2022; Stephens et al., 2022). Tenet 2, which recognizes the importance of multidimensional identities, appeared in four sources (33.3%). These sources highlighted the importance of examining race and disability together rather than treating them as separate influences on educational experiences (Chiu et al., 2022; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022; Urbani et al., 2022).

Tenet 6, which considers Whiteness and ability as forms of property that provide social advantages, was also identified in four sources (33.3%). This tenet was particularly relevant to discussions of how racialized assumptions can influence behavioral judgments and the degree to which students receive the benefit of the doubt (Hancock et al., 2021; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022). Tenet 3, which examines the social construction of race and ability, appeared in two sources (16.7%). These sources provided opportunities to consider how educational categories and professional judgments can shape understandings of student behavior (Enders et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2021).

Tenet 4, which privileges the perspectives of marginalized populations, was identified in two sources (16.7%; Chiu et al., 2022; Urbani et al., 2022). Tenet 5, which recognizes the historical and legal dimensions of racism and ableism, also appeared in two sources (16.7%; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Kervick et al., 2025). Similarly, Tenet 7, which emphasizes activism and resistance to inequitable systems, was identified in two sources (16.7%; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Urbani et al., 2022). Although these tenets appeared less frequently in the coding, they remain important to understanding how teacher preparation programs might move beyond identifying individual bias toward examining and challenging the institutional conditions that sustain inequity.

Overall, the analysis suggests that the literature places considerable attention on how preservice teachers understand and interpret student differences, while providing less consistent attention to historical context, marginalized perspectives, and structural change. From a DisCrit perspective, this distinction matters because recognizing bias is not the same as addressing the educational systems that allow biased decisions to continue (Connor et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2021; Perouse-Harvey, 2022; Urbani et al., 2022). The findings point to a need for teacher preparation programs to connect individual reflection with a broader examination of racism, ableism, and institutional responsibility.

Study Characteristics Analysis

The analysis of the included literature revealed several recurring patterns related to implicit bias and preservice teacher preparation. Across the 12 sources, three interconnected areas emerged: racialized interpretations of student behavior, the role of teacher preparation in addressing bias, and the challenges associated with translating awareness into changes in educational decision-making. Although the sources examined these issues using different research designs and scholarly perspectives, they collectively raised questions about how future educators are prepared to recognize and respond to inequity (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022).

Research examining behavioral judgments offered insight into how racial assumptions may influence teacher perceptions. Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) examined preservice teachers' expectations concerning Black boys' behavior and identified differences in how misbehavior was anticipated and interpreted. Lorenzetti and Johnson (2023) examined the relationship between implicit racial attitudes and the labeling of classroom behavior. Together, these studies demonstrate the importance of examining teacher judgments before disciplinary

decisions are made, because the labels assigned to behavior may influence how educators understand students and the responses they consider appropriate (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Other studies examined how teacher preparation experiences can help teacher candidates recognize and challenge bias. Ellis-Robinson (2021) explored collaborative approaches to equity-focused learning, while Enders et al. (2022) examined preservice teacher preparation related to behavioral assessment. Breese et al. (2023), Lavin and Goodman (2023), and Perouse-Harvey (2022) contributed additional perspectives on reflection, teacher beliefs, and the ways preservice teachers engage with questions of race, disability, and educational equity. These studies suggest that teacher preparation can provide opportunities for critical examination of assumptions, although the approaches and outcomes varied (Breese et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2022; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022).

The literature also raises questions about whether increased awareness leads to changes in practice. Stephens et al. (2022) examined implicit ethnic-achievement bias and beliefs about academic ability across teacher education experiences, contributing evidence about the persistence of implicit associations. Chiu et al. (2022) highlighted the complexities involved in educators' engagement with race and disability, including the discomfort that may emerge when professional beliefs are challenged. These findings suggest that simply exposing preservice teachers to conversations about equity may not be sufficient to change how they interpret student behavior or make educational decisions (Chiu et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2022).

The conceptual and practitioner-focused publications provided additional context for understanding these findings. Hancock et al. (2021), Kervick et al. (2025), and Urbani et al. (2022), as classified in Table 1, contributed perspectives concerning educational structures,

institutional conditions, and the development of critical consciousness. Rather than treating these publications as direct evidence of intervention effectiveness, they were used to help interpret the empirical findings and consider their implications for teacher preparation.

Taken together, the literature suggests that addressing implicit bias requires attention to both individual beliefs and the educational environments in which those beliefs develop. While several sources identify opportunities for structured reflection and equity-focused learning, fewer directly examine whether these experiences produce sustained changes in disciplinary decisions or intervention selection (Breese et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2022). This distinction is particularly important when considering Black students with EBD, whose educational experiences may be shaped by the intersection of racialized behavioral expectations and disability-related assumptions (Connor et al., 2016; Perouse-Harvey, 2022).

Thematic Analysis

Racialized Interpretations

Across the reviewed literature, racialized assumptions emerged as an important consideration in how preservice teachers interpreted student behavior. Research examining behavioral expectations and classroom judgments suggests that race can influence whether behavior is perceived as intentional, threatening, or disruptive (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). These findings are especially relevant when considering Black boys with EBD, whose behavior may be interpreted through assumptions associated with both race and disability. From a DisCrit perspective, these interpretations raise questions about how educational expectations are established and whether students are evaluated according to standards that privilege particular racial and behavioral norms (Connor et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2021).

Behavioral labeling is important because the language educators use to describe students can influence how they understand behavioral needs and determine appropriate responses. For example, Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) reported that preservice teachers had 6.187 times greater odds of anticipating repeated misbehavior when the student was identified as Black rather than White. This finding suggests that racialized expectations may influence judgments about whether behavior is likely to continue. Lorenzetti and Johnson (2023) also examined the relationship between implicit racial attitudes and the labeling of classroom behavior. Together, these studies demonstrate why behavioral interpretation deserves attention before disciplinary decisions are made.

These patterns align with DisCrit's emphasis on the social construction of race and ability. Educational labels are not applied outside of social and institutional contexts. Rather, they are shaped by professional expectations, cultural assumptions, and the ways schools define appropriate behavior (Connor et al., 2016; Enders et al., 2022). When educators interpret a student's behavior as evidence of an enduring personal characteristic rather than considering the circumstances surrounding it, they may overlook opportunities for supportive intervention. This concern is especially important for Black boys with EBD because disability-related needs and racialized behavioral expectations may influence the same educational decision.

The literature also suggests that these assumptions are not necessarily resolved simply by progressing through teacher preparation. Stephens et al. (2022) examined implicit ethnic-achievement bias and beliefs about academic ability among teacher education students, finding that certain implicit associations persisted across preparation experiences. Although that study did not directly establish how preservice teachers respond to Black boys with EBD, its findings raise broader questions about whether traditional coursework is sufficient to challenge implicit

associations. Taken together, the reviewed sources suggest that teacher preparation programs should provide structured opportunities for future educators to examine how their assumptions influence behavioral judgments and the decisions that follow (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Stephens et al., 2022).

Program Design Shapes Equity-Oriented Teacher Preparation

The design of teacher preparation programs was another important consideration across the literature. Addressing implicit bias requires more than introducing preservice teachers to the concept during an individual course or professional development activity. Teacher candidates also need opportunities to examine how race, disability, and behavior are understood within the classrooms and institutions where they receive training. Kervick et al. (2025) discussed institutional challenges affecting special education teacher preparation, while Ellis-Robinson (2021) and Urbani et al. (2022) offered approaches for incorporating equity-focused learning and critical consciousness into educator preparation.

Field experiences are particularly important because preservice teachers encounter professional expectations that may reinforce or challenge what they have learned in their coursework. A preparation program may emphasize culturally responsive and inclusive practices, but teacher candidates may observe different expectations during clinical placements. This points to the need for greater alignment among coursework, field experiences, mentoring, and supervision. Hancock et al. (2021) examined the relevance of racism and ableism within fieldwork contexts, while Kervick et al. (2025) highlighted broader institutional considerations that can influence how teacher preparation is organized.

These concerns also align with DisCrit's attention to the historical and institutional conditions that shape educational inequity. Without examining how racism and ableism have

influenced special education practices, preservice teachers may understand disciplinary disparities as isolated incidents rather than as part of broader patterns (Connor et al., 2016). Teacher preparation programs therefore have a responsibility to help future educators examine not only their individual beliefs but also the policies, professional expectations, and institutional practices that influence educational decision-making. The reviewed literature suggests that equity-focused preparation is more meaningful when these conversations are integrated throughout the program rather than treated as separate from the practical work of teaching (Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Hancock et al., 2021; Kervick et al., 2025; Urbani et al., 2022).

Implicit Bias Training Is a Work in Progress

The reviewed literature suggests that addressing implicit bias within preservice teacher preparation continues to present challenges. Although teacher education programs provide opportunities to develop professional knowledge and experience, participation in coursework does not necessarily eliminate implicit associations related to race (Chiu et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2022). Stephens et al. (2022), for example, examined implicit ethnic-achievement bias among teacher education students and found that these associations did not necessarily change as students progressed through their preparation. This raises questions about the assumption that additional coursework or classroom experience will independently produce more equitable beliefs and judgments.

Other sources described approaches that may help preservice teachers recognize and critically examine their assumptions. These approaches included structured reflection, applied learning activities, collaborative equity projects, and opportunities to examine race and disability within educational decision-making (Breese et al., 2023; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Enders et al., 2022; Perouse-Harvey, 2022). Rather than treating bias as a problem that can be addressed

through a single activity, these approaches encourage teacher candidates to revisit their assumptions and consider how those assumptions may influence professional practice.

However, increased awareness must be distinguished from demonstrated changes in behavior. A preservice teacher may become more comfortable discussing implicit bias without necessarily changing how they interpret student behavior or select interventions. Similarly, a teacher candidate may demonstrate greater understanding of inequity during a reflective activity without that understanding carrying over into classroom decision-making. Although the reviewed literature provides support for continued attention to equity-focused preparation, the available evidence does not establish that any single training approach consistently produces sustained changes in disciplinary outcomes (Chiu et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2022).

These findings indicate that teacher preparation programs should consider how bias-focused instruction connects to the decisions educators will eventually make in classrooms. Activities involving behavioral scenarios, guided reflection, and Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) may provide opportunities to examine how race and disability influence interpretations of student behavior. Future research should evaluate whether these approaches lead to measurable differences in intervention selection and disciplinary reasoning rather than relying exclusively on changes in awareness or attitudes (Enders et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Reflective Practices Guide Equity-Oriented Growth

Across the reviewed literature, reflective practices emerged as one approach for helping preservice teachers examine their assumptions about race, disability, and student behavior. Activities such as reflective journaling, guided discussions, and analytical writing can provide

opportunities for teacher candidates to consider how their experiences and beliefs influence the ways they understand students (Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022). These practices are particularly relevant to implicit bias because educators may not immediately recognize how assumptions shape their professional judgments.

Reflection, however, should extend beyond asking preservice teachers to describe their feelings or experiences. Without clear expectations and opportunities for deeper examination, reflective activities may remain focused on individual intentions rather than the consequences of educational decisions. Lavin and Goodman (2023) and Perouse-Harvey (2022) provide perspectives on how reflection can be connected to questions of culture, disability, and educational equity. Their work suggests the importance of helping teacher candidates examine not only what they believe but also how those beliefs may influence their interactions with students.

From a DisCrit perspective, reflective practices should make space for the experiences and perspectives of students and families who have been marginalized within educational systems. DisCrit emphasizes the importance of these perspectives in challenging dominant understandings of race, disability, and normalcy (Connor et al., 2016). When preservice teachers engage with perspectives that differ from their own, they have an opportunity to question assumptions they may otherwise take for granted. This is especially relevant when considering Black students with EBD, whose experiences may be reduced to behavioral labels or disciplinary records.

Reflection may be especially useful when connected to practical educational decisions. For example, preservice teachers could be asked to examine a behavioral scenario, explain their initial interpretation, consider whether racial or disability-related assumptions influenced that

interpretation, and identify alternative supportive responses. This type of activity could help connect critical reflection to the decisions educators make in classrooms. However, additional research is needed to determine whether reflective practices produce lasting changes in behavioral judgments or intervention selection (Enders et al., 2022; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022).

DisCrit Analysis

The reviewed literature also highlighted personal and emotional challenges that may arise when preservice teachers are asked to examine their assumptions about race and disability. Conversations about implicit bias may challenge how teacher candidates understand themselves as future educators, particularly when they believe their intentions are fair or inclusive. Chiu et al. (2022) examined these tensions within educators' engagement with implicit bias, while Perouse-Harvey (2022) considered how intersectional and DisCrit-informed approaches can support more critical understandings of educational inequity.

These challenges matter because discomfort may influence whether preservice teachers engage with or resist conversations about race and disability. When discussions focus exclusively on whether an individual educator is biased, opportunities to examine the broader educational conditions that shape those beliefs may be overlooked. DisCrit provides a way to move beyond individual intentions by examining how racism and ableism operate together within institutions and professional practices (Connor et al., 2016). This approach does not eliminate the importance of personal accountability. Instead, it places individual judgments within the larger systems that influence how students are understood and treated.

Marginalized perspectives are also central to this discussion. DisCrit encourages educators and researchers to consider the experiences of individuals whose voices have often

been excluded from educational decision-making (Connor et al., 2016). For preservice teachers, this means recognizing that professional knowledge about student behavior should not come exclusively from textbooks, assessment procedures, or classroom observations. The perspectives of students and families can also provide important insight into how educational practices are experienced and whether those practices are supportive or harmful.

Collectively, these findings suggest that DisCrit-informed teacher preparation should connect critical reflection with a broader examination of educational responsibility. Preservice teachers need opportunities to question how behavioral expectations are established, how racial and disability-related assumptions influence professional judgments, and what changes may be necessary to create more equitable educational environments. Although the reviewed literature offers theoretical and applied approaches for this work, further empirical research is needed to determine how DisCrit-informed preparation influences actual classroom decisions and disciplinary outcomes (Chiu et al., 2022; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Perouse-Harvey, 2022; Urbani et al., 2022).

Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that implicit bias remains an important concern within preservice teacher preparation, particularly in how future educators interpret student behavior and consider disciplinary responses. Across the literature, studies examining racialized behavioral expectations and implicit attitudes demonstrated that teacher judgments may be influenced by assumptions about race (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesch & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). These findings are especially concerning when considering Black boys with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD), whose behavior may be understood through assumptions associated with both race and disability. From a DisCrit perspective, these patterns

raise questions about how educational systems define appropriate behavior and whose needs are recognized as deserving of support (Connor et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2021).

One finding concerns the varied ways implicit bias was examined across the literature. Some studies focused on implicit attitudes and associations, while others examined behavioral expectations, teacher reflection, or experiences within preparation programs (Breese et al., 2023; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). These differences are important because recognizing an implicit association is not the same as demonstrating that the association influences a particular disciplinary decision. Studies examining teacher judgments can provide insight into how behavior is interpreted, but additional research is needed to determine whether those interpretations lead educators to select different interventions or disciplinary responses.

The findings further suggest that bias may influence educational decision-making at multiple points rather than through a single judgment. As illustrated in Figure 2, these points can be understood through four interconnected stages: perception, intervention selection, justification, and outcome. During perception, educators interpret the nature, severity, and possible causes of student behavior. Research examining racialized expectations suggests that these interpretations may be influenced by assumptions about race (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). During intervention selection, educators consider whether the behavior requires additional assessment, supportive intervention, or disciplinary action. Although this stage is central to the review's focus, relatively few included studies directly examined intervention selection as an outcome.

At the justification stage, educators explain the reasoning behind their decisions. Teachers may refer to classroom expectations, safety, behavioral history, or perceived student

intent when determining how to respond. These explanations are important because decisions presented as objective or professionally appropriate may still reflect assumptions that have not been critically examined. DisCrit provides a framework for considering how these judgments may be shaped by broader educational expectations concerning race, disability, and normalcy (Connor et al., 2016; Enders et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2021). The final stage, outcome, concerns the consequences of these decisions for students, including access to support, instructional opportunities, and disciplinary responses. The four-stage pathway presented in Figure 2 is an interpretive model developed from the review findings, not a sequence that was directly tested in every included study.

Participant characteristics also warrant consideration. Several included studies reported predominantly White teacher candidate samples, while others included participants from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds (Breese et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Stephens et al., 2022). These differences matter because preservice teachers enter preparation programs with different experiences and understandings of race, disability, and educational opportunity. However, demographic reporting was inconsistent across studies, limiting the extent to which the review could examine how participant characteristics were associated with bias or decision-making.

Together, these findings reinforce the importance of examining implicit bias as both an individual and institutional concern. Teacher preparation programs have opportunities to help future educators recognize assumptions, examine behavioral judgments, and consider how professional expectations may contribute to inequitable outcomes. At the same time, the available literature does not establish that awareness alone leads to sustained changes in practice. A more complete understanding of implicit bias will require research that connects teacher

beliefs and interpretations to observable educational decisions, particularly when those decisions affect Black students with EBD (Chiu et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2022; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Preservice Teacher Bias and Behavioral Labeling

A key concern identified in this review is the role of behavioral labeling in educational decision-making. The terms educators use to describe behavior can influence whether a student is understood as intentionally disruptive, experiencing a disability-related need, or responding to circumstances within the classroom. Research examining racialized expectations and implicit attitudes suggests that these judgments may be influenced by assumptions about race (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). This raises concerns about how Black boys with EBD may be perceived when their behavior does not align with established classroom expectations.

Behavioral labels can shape what educators believe should happen next. When behavior is understood primarily as defiance or misconduct, teachers may place greater emphasis on compliance and disciplinary consequences. When the same behavior is examined in relation to environmental conditions, communication, or unmet support needs, educators may consider different responses. Functional Behavior Assessment offers one approach for examining the circumstances associated with behavior rather than relying exclusively on initial impressions. Enders et al. (2022) examined the importance of addressing race and implicit bias within the FBA process, highlighting the relevance of these considerations to preservice teacher preparation.

From a DisCrit perspective, behavioral labeling requires attention to how schools construct ideas of appropriate behavior and how those expectations may disadvantage students at

the intersection of race and disability (Connor et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2021). Teacher preparation programs should therefore encourage preservice teachers to question the assumptions underlying behavioral descriptions and to consider whether their interpretations would remain consistent across students from different racial and disability backgrounds. Although the reviewed literature supports the importance of examining these judgments, further research is needed to determine whether changes in behavioral labeling lead to more equitable intervention choices and disciplinary outcomes (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Program Design in Preservice Training

The findings of this review suggest that teacher preparation programs should address implicit bias through ongoing learning, reflection, and applied practice rather than relying exclusively on isolated awareness activities. Reflective journaling, guided discussions, and equity-focused projects were among the approaches discussed in the included literature (Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022; Urbani et al., 2022). These activities can create opportunities for preservice teachers to examine how their assumptions influence the ways they understand students and respond to educational challenges.

The effectiveness of these approaches, however, may depend on how they are incorporated into the broader preparation program. Teacher candidates need opportunities to connect discussions of race and disability with the practical responsibilities they will encounter in classrooms. This includes examining behavioral scenarios, receiving feedback on professional reasoning, and considering how educational decisions may affect students from marginalized populations. Field experiences are also important because the expectations and practices preservice teachers encounter during placements may either reinforce or challenge the equity-focused instruction they receive in coursework (Hancock et al., 2021; Kervick et al., 2025).

One approach involves integrating equity-focused questions into established behavioral assessment procedures. For example, preservice teachers completing an FBA could be asked to consider whether assumptions about race or disability have influenced their initial description of the behavior, the information they collected, or the interventions they recommend. Enders et al. (2022) provide a relevant foundation for considering race and implicit bias within behavioral assessment. Although this approach requires further evaluation, it offers a practical opportunity to connect critical reflection with professional decision-making.

More broadly, addressing implicit bias should be treated as an ongoing responsibility within teacher preparation. Programs need to consider how coursework, field experiences, supervision, and assessment practices collectively shape future educators' understanding of students. From a DisCrit perspective, this responsibility also includes questioning the institutional expectations that influence how behavior is defined and how students are supported (Connor et al., 2016; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Urbani et al., 2022).

Program Preparation

The literature offers several implications for teacher preparation. Programs should address implicit bias as a complex, ongoing concern rather than a standalone topic. This approach requires embedding equity-focused prompts into coursework, providing structured opportunities for practice, and supporting preservice teachers as they make decisions about student behavior (Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Enders et al., 2022; Perouse-Harvey, 2022; Urbani et al., 2022). Integrating opportunities to examine bias into behavioral decision-making activities may help preservice teachers connect equity-focused learning with decisions that shape student outcomes (Chiu et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2022; Urbani et al., 2022). Repeated case-based learning offers opportunities to analyze comparable behavioral scenarios across different racial

contexts. This approach may help preservice teachers recognize when their interpretations shift and make bias more visible in everyday decision-making (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Urbani et al., 2022). Reflective journaling may also support this work when paired with feedback and opportunities to explain the reasoning behind educational decisions (Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022; Urbani et al., 2022). DisCrit-oriented pedagogy can help preservice teachers connect individual decisions to broader structural conditions. By examining how racism and ableism contribute to inequities in disciplinary systems, future educators may be better prepared to question exclusionary norms and advocate for supportive practices (Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022). Overall, the literature identifies bias as an important influence on teacher decision-making, but fewer sources address the structural conditions that shape those decisions. Much of the research focuses on disparities in behavioral interpretation and discipline, with less attention to how teacher preparation can support the systemic awareness and action needed to challenge inequitable practices.

Gaps in the Literature

Several gaps remain in research on implicit bias within preservice teacher preparation. One of the most important concerns is the limited number of studies that directly examine whether race influences intervention selection when student behavior is held constant. Although research using behavioral scenarios has demonstrated the importance of racialized expectations and teacher judgments, fewer studies have examined whether those judgments translate into different supportive or disciplinary responses (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). This distinction matters because identifying bias in how behavior is perceived does not necessarily explain how educators make decisions about interventions. Future research should use carefully designed behavioral scenarios and experimental approaches to examine

whether identical behaviors produce different responses when student race or disability status is varied.

A second gap concerns the outcomes used to evaluate implicit bias training. Much of the reviewed literature focuses on attitudes, reflection, awareness, or teacher preparation experiences, while fewer studies directly measure the decisions educators make when responding to student behavior (Breese et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2022). Although these measures provide useful information, they do not fully establish whether teacher preparation changes disciplinary practices. Future studies should examine outcomes such as behavioral labeling, intervention selection, referral decisions, and the reasoning preservice teachers use to justify their responses. Longitudinal research could also help determine whether changes observed during preparation are maintained when educators enter their own classrooms.

The literature also presents different approaches to understanding implicit bias. Some studies emphasize implicit associations and individual judgments, while others examine reflection, professional learning, and the institutional conditions that shape teacher preparation (Chiu et al., 2022; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Kervick et al., 2025; Stephens et al., 2022). These approaches offer different forms of evidence, but they are not always connected in ways that explain how beliefs influence practice. Future research should examine how individual attitudes, professional expectations, and institutional structures work together to shape educational decisions. A DisCrit framework may be particularly useful for this work because it encourages researchers to consider racism and ableism as interconnected rather than separate influences on educational experiences (Connor et al., 2016).

Finally, more attention is needed to the experiences of Black students with EBD and their families. Although the reviewed literature provides insight into teacher beliefs and preparation

experiences, the perspectives of students and families are not consistently centered. This is an important limitation because educational decisions have consequences beyond the judgments made by individual teachers. Research that incorporates the experiences of Black students with EBD and their families could provide a more complete understanding of how disciplinary practices are experienced and what meaningful support looks like from the perspectives of those most affected. Such work would also align with DisCrit's emphasis on marginalized voices and the need to challenge inequitable educational systems (Connor et al., 2016; Perouse-Harvey, 2022; Urbani et al., 2022).

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this review. First, the final corpus consisted of 12 peer-reviewed sources, including nine studies classified as empirical research and three conceptual or practitioner-focused publications. Although these sources provided valuable perspectives on implicit bias and teacher preparation, the relatively small body of literature limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized across teacher education programs. The inclusion of different publication types also required careful consideration of the distinction between empirical findings and theoretical or practice-based recommendations.

Second, the empirical studies varied considerably in their research designs, participant characteristics, and approaches to measuring bias. Some examined implicit attitudes, while others focused on behavioral judgments, reflective practices, or educational experiences (Breese et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). These differences made direct comparisons difficult and prevented the review from determining whether any single preparation strategy was consistently more effective than another. Additionally, not all studies directly measured disciplinary decisions or

intervention selection. As a result, conclusions about how bias influences actual classroom practices must be interpreted cautiously.

Third, the literature did not consistently report participant demographics or provide detailed descriptions of educational settings. Several studies included predominantly White participants, while others represented more racially and ethnically diverse samples (Breese et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). These reporting differences limited opportunities to examine whether patterns varied according to race, gender, institutional context, or teacher preparation experience. This is particularly important given the focus of this review on Black students with EBD and the ways race and disability may intersect in educational decision-making.

Another limitation relates to the use of DisCrit as an interpretive framework. Although the seven tenets provided a valuable approach to examining the literature, not every included source explicitly used DisCrit (Connor et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2021; Perouse-Harvey, 2022). The identification of relevant tenets therefore involved interpretive coding rather than simply documenting whether authors directly referenced the framework. To strengthen the consistency of this process, two reviewers independently coded all 12 sources, achieving an initial agreement of 83%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and reexamination of the original sources. Nevertheless, the interpretation of theoretical concepts remains an important consideration when evaluating the findings.

Finally, this review was limited to peer-reviewed publications from 2015 through 2025, with searches conducted between October and November 2025. Relevant dissertations, unpublished studies, and other forms of gray literature were not included. Although the PRISMA-guided process provided a structured approach to identifying and selecting sources

(Page et al., 2021), the findings remain dependent on the scope of the search and the literature available during the review period. Future research should build on these findings by examining how preservice teacher preparation influences observable behavioral judgments, intervention selection, and disciplinary outcomes over time (Enders et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Conclusion

This systematic literature review suggests that implicit bias remains an important concern in preservice teacher preparation, particularly when considering how future educators interpret student behavior and make decisions about discipline and support. Across the 12 included sources, research on racialized expectations, implicit attitudes, and teacher preparation experiences demonstrated the importance of examining how race and disability may influence educational judgments (Chiu et al., 2022; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2022). These concerns are particularly relevant for Black boys with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD), whose educational experiences may be shaped by assumptions associated with both race and disability. Through a DisCrit framework, this review highlights the need to question not only individual bias but also the educational expectations and institutional practices that contribute to inequitable outcomes (Connor et al., 2016).

Although the literature describes opportunities for structured reflection, equity-focused instruction, and applied learning experiences, evidence of sustained changes in disciplinary decision-making remains limited (Breese et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2022; Lavin & Goodman, 2023; Perouse-Harvey, 2022). Future research should move beyond measuring awareness and examine whether teacher preparation influences how educators interpret identical behaviors, select interventions, and justify their decisions. This work should also consider the perspectives

of Black students with EBD and their families, whose experiences can help educators better understand the consequences of disciplinary practices. Ultimately, preparing future teachers to recognize implicit bias is an important starting point, but meaningful progress requires examining how that awareness is translated into educational decisions and whether those decisions create more equitable opportunities for students.

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Table 1

Included Studies Characteristics

Study	Study Design	Teacher Type	Race/Ethnicity	# in Study
Breese et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Preservice Teachers	White 65% Black/African American 5% Asian 4% Native American 2% Approx 24% of participants preferred to not disclose their racial identity	154
Chiu et al. (2022)	Qualitative	Preservice and practicing special educators	White: 43 Black: 15 Asian: 4 Hispanic: 3 Hispanic/White (multiracial): 2 Other multiracial (Mexican American/Scandinavian): 1 Not specified	68
Ellis-Robinson (2021)	Qualitative	Preservice Teachers	White	50
Enders et al. (2022)	Mixed Methods	Preservice Teachers	White	6
Hancock et al. (2021)	Conceptual	Preservice Teachers	N/A	N/A
Kervick et al. (2025)	Practitioner report	Preservice Teachers	N/A	N/A
Kunesh & Noltemeyer (2019)	Mixed methods	Preservice teachers	White: 90 Other: 58	148
Lavin & Goodman (2023)	Qualitative	Preservice Teachers	White	14
Lorenzetti & Johnson (2023)	Quantitative	Teacher education students	White 8 Black 1 Hispanic 4 Asian 4	17
Perouse-Harvey (2022)	Qualitative	Preservice general	White	5

Study	Study Design	Teacher Type	Race/Ethnicity	# in Study
Stephens et al. (2022)	Qualitative	education teachers Preservice Teachers	172 European, 25 Maori, 54 Pacifica, 22 Asian, 37 other	313
Urbani et al. (2022)	Practitioner report	Preservice Teachers	N/A	N/A

Note: NA = not applicable

Table 2

Literature Aligned to Tenets of DisCrit

Study	Primary DisCrit Tenets	Focus of Analysis
Breese et al. (2023)	Tenet 1	Structured reflection and bias reduction
Chiu et al. (2022)	Tenets 2, 4	Fragility and discomfort in identifying bias
Ellis-Robinson (2021)	Tenets 5, 7	Collaboration for equity and passion projects
Enders et al. (2022)	Tenets 1, 3	Race-conscious Functional Behavior Assessments
Hancock et al. (2021)	Tenets 1, 3, 6	Fieldwork ecology and dysconscious racism
Kervick et al. (2025)	Tenets 1, 5	Institutional constraints on equitable training
Kunesh & Noltemeyer (2019)	Tenet 6	Racialized expectations of behavior severity
Lavin & Goodman (2023)	Tenet 2	Reflective journaling and cultural competence
Lorenzetti & Johnson (2023)	Tenet 6	Implicit attitudes and behavior labeling
Perouse-Harvey (2022)	Tenets 1, 2, 6	Intersectionality and "Seeing the Unseen"
Stephens et al. (2022)	Tenet 1	Stability of ethnic achievement bias over time
Urbani et al. (2022)	Tenets 2, 4, 7	Developing critical consciousness in inclusion

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Selection Process

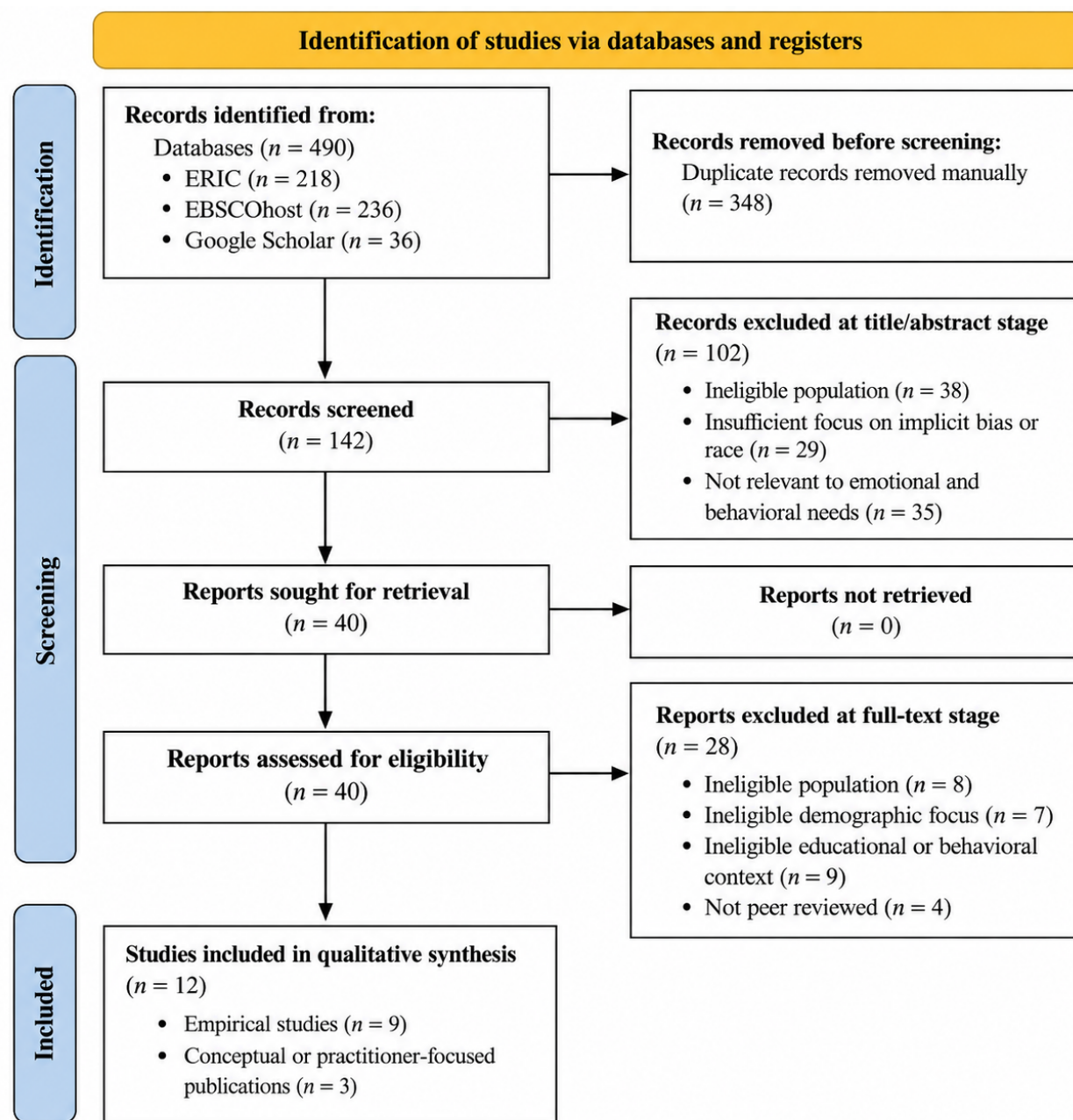
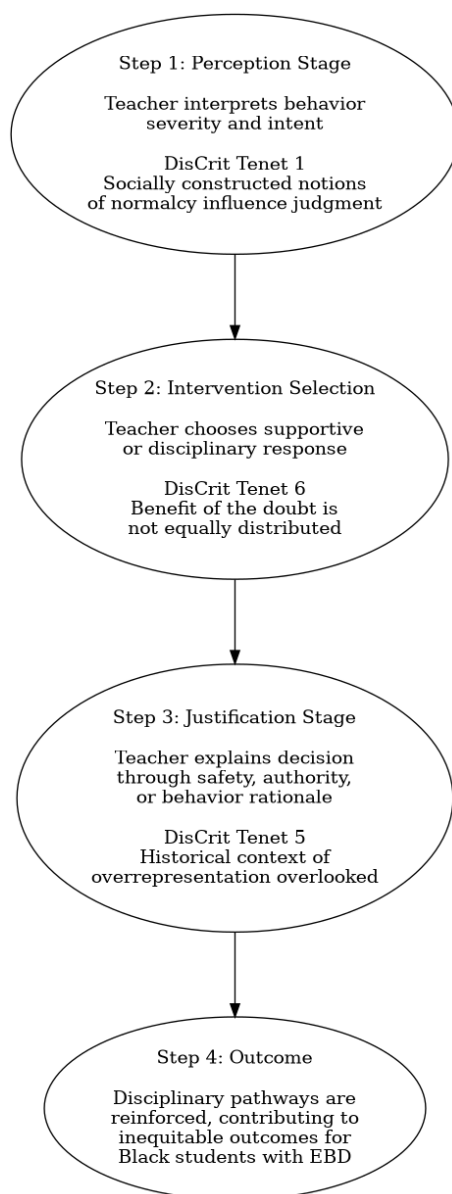


Figure 2

Decision-Making Pathway of Implicit Bias in preservice Teacher Responses to Black Students with EBD



**Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Learning and the Lived Experiences of
African American Males in Urban Alternative Education: A Proposed
Phenomenological Study**

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We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

African American males in urban school districts are suspended, expelled, and sent to disciplinary alternative schools at much higher rates than their peers. These placements often lead to lost classroom time, higher dropout rates, and later involvement with the juvenile justice system. While social-emotional learning (SEL) is promoted to help students manage emotions, build relationships, and stay engaged, many SEL programs overlook students' cultural backgrounds and the specific challenges African American males face in school. This paper outlines a proposed qualitative study; no data have been collected yet. The study will use interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore how African American male students in an urban alternative high school experience culturally responsive SEL, how educators and administrators understand and practice it, and what challenges affect its implementation. This study uses phenomenology to understand how students make sense of these experiences, not to evaluate a specific program. The study is based on critical race theory, culturally relevant

teaching, and progressive SEL. It will involve eight to ten students and four to six educators and administrators from one school in a large southeastern district. The study will collect data through interviews, student focus groups, weekly classroom observations, a short questionnaire, and school documents. The paper distinguishes previous research from the proposed study by presenting expected outcomes as ideas from the literature rather than results. It also explains recruitment, consent, ethical protections, researcher reflection, and limitations. The study aims to help urban teachers, school leaders, and policymakers design SEL that supports Black male students and reduces exclusionary discipline. It uniquely focuses on students who have already been removed from traditional schools, a group often missing from research.

Keywords: culturally responsive social-emotional learning, African American males, alternative education, interpretative phenomenological analysis, urban education

Introduction

For decades, research on the schooling of African American males has documented a consistent pattern of disproportionality. African American males are overrepresented in special education and in exclusionary discipline and are underrepresented in gifted and advanced coursework (Howard, 2014; Woods et al., 2023). These disparities are not explained by differences regarding student behavior alone. Black students are more likely than their White peers to be referred for subjective offenses such as defiance or disrespect (Skiba et al., 2002), and teachers are more likely to interpret repeated misbehavior by a Black student as part of a worrisome pattern that warrants escalating punishment (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Because each removal costs instructional time, the discipline gap and the achievement gap reinforce one another (Gregory et al., 2010). Throughout this paper, the use of the terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably, consistent with the literature reviewed.

Disciplinary alternative schools sit near the end of this continuum. Students referred to them have usually accumulated suspensions, and placement in a disciplinary alternative setting has been associated with subsequent juvenile detention, a relationship that is especially evident for Black students (Vanderhaar et al., 2014). Nationally, the status dropout rate for Black males ages 16 to 24 was 7.0% in 2022, compared with 4.9% for White males (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2024). These figures often overlook students in alternative programs until they leave school entirely, making alternative education an important and understudied site for intervention in urban districts.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is commonly organized around five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2020). A meta-analysis of more than 200 school-based programs found that SEL improved students' social behavior and academic performance, while reducing conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011). Scholars have cautioned, however, that SEL delivered without attention to culture and power can become a tool for managing compliance rather than supporting student agency, particularly for Black youth whose emotional expressions are often misread as threatening (Dees & Lowery, 2024; Jagers et al., 2019). Transformative SEL responds to this critique by centering identity, agency, belonging, and joint problem-solving to advance equity (Jagers et al., 2019). What remains largely unexamined is how African American males who have already been removed from traditional schools and placed in alternative settings experience SEL, and whether they experience it as culturally responsive.

Purpose, Research Questions, and Study Status

The purpose of the proposed study is to understand how African American male students in an urban disciplinary alternative high school experience culturally responsive SEL, and how the adults who serve them understand, enact, and are constrained in delivering it. Three research questions will guide the study:

- How do African American male students in an urban alternative high school experience social-emotional learning, including the extent to which it reflects and affirms their cultural identities? (lived experience)
- How do educators and administrators in the school understand and enact culturally responsive social-emotional learning practices? (culturally responsive SEL practice)
- What barriers and facilitators shape the implementation of culturally responsive social-emotional learning for African American male students in this setting? (implementation barriers)

This paper describes a proposed study. No data have been collected, and the paper reports no empirical findings. Statements about the effects of SEL, culturally relevant pedagogy, and related practices are drawn from prior scholarship and are cited as such. The proposed study's predicted outcomes are presented separately in the section titled Literature-Based Propositions as expectations to be examined, not as results.

This study draws on the author's 25 years of experience working with African American males in education and on raising an African American son. The goal is to add to urban education research by showing what culturally responsive SEL looks like from the perspective of students most impacted by exclusionary discipline. The study also aims to give teachers, school

leaders, and policymakers practical guidance for creating SEL programs that support, rather than police, Black male students.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on three complementary perspectives. Critical race theory explains the conditions that lead African American males into alternative education; culturally relevant pedagogy describes the teaching stance needed to respond to those conditions; and progressive SEL connects that stance to the specific competencies SEL programs aim to build. Together they form the integrated framework shown in Figure 1.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) entered education scholarship as an approach to analyzing how race and racism are embedded in the structures, policies, and everyday practices of schooling (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Three of its tenets are crucial to this study. First, racism is treated as ordinary rather than aberrant, which directs attention to how seemingly neutral discipline codes and SEL curricula may produce racially disparate outcomes. Second, CRT challenges colorblind and deficit-oriented explanations, such as the assumption that Black males lack self-control, that locate problems in students rather than in systems (Hatcher et al., 2022). Third, CRT values counter-storytelling, the experiential knowledge of people of color, as legitimate evidence. This idea supports the study's decision to center the lived experiences of African American male students rather than relying only on adult reports or administrative data.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1995) defined culturally relevant pedagogy through three commitments: students experience academic success, students develop and sustain cultural competence, and

students develop critical consciousness that allows them to question social inequities. Gay (2018) extended this work by describing culturally relevant teaching as using students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and frames of reference to make learning more meaningful and efficient. Studies with secondary teachers and students suggest that these practices strengthen engagement, self-efficacy, and a feeling of belonging (Cruse, 2019; Samuels, 2018). In this study, the three commitments provide a lens for understanding whether participants experience SEL as culturally responsive, for example, whether self-awareness lessons invite students to explore racial identity and whether responsible decision-making lessons acknowledge the inequitable contexts in which students make decisions.

Transformative Social-Emotional Learning

Jagers et al. (2019) proposed transformative SEL as a form of SEL explicitly aimed at educational equity. Rather than treating the five SEL competencies as culturally neutral skills, transformative SEL emphasizes identity, agency, belonging, curiosity, and joint problem-solving, and it attends to the relationships between students and adults and the power relations in those relationships. This perspective bridges CRT and culturally relevant pedagogy with the SEL literature: it accepts the value of SEL competencies while insisting that they be taught in ways that affirm students' identities and equip them to address injustice.

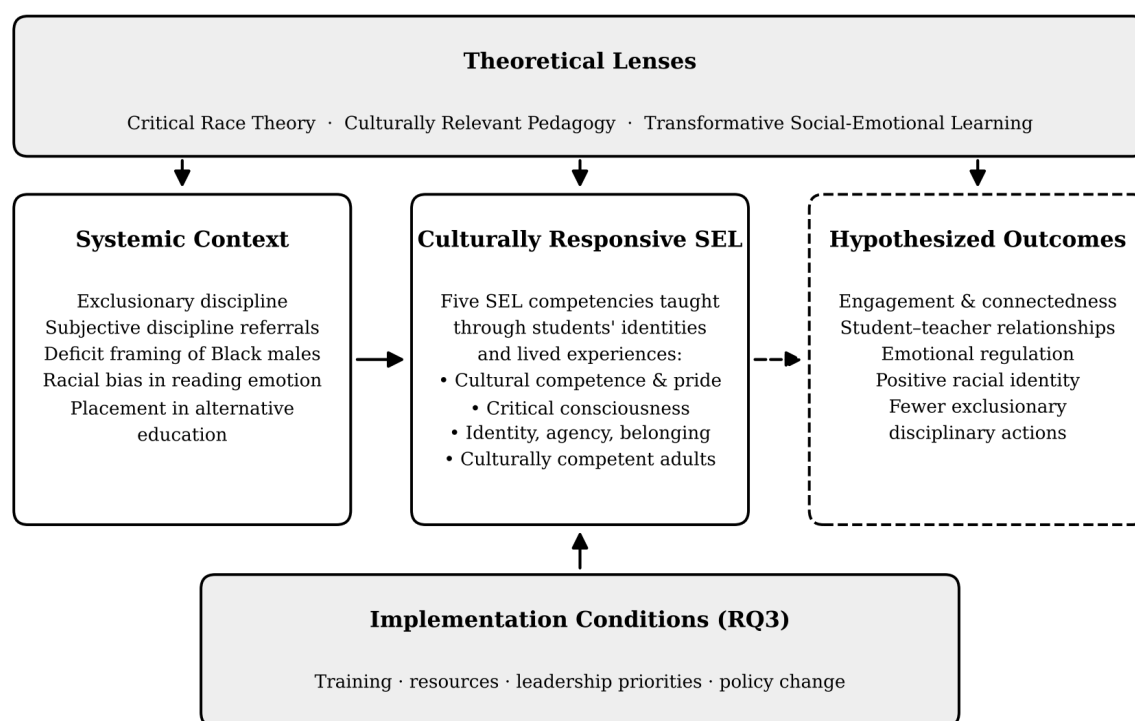
Integrated Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows how these ideas shape the study. The context described by critical race theory, such as exclusionary discipline and deficit thinking, influences the experiences African American males have in alternative schools. In this study, culturally responsive SEL means teaching the five SEL skills in ways that include cultural competence, critical thinking, identity affirmation, and strong relationships with culturally aware adults. Factors such as staff training,

resources, leadership, and policy changes are expected to support or hinder this teaching and are the focus of the third research question. The outcomes in the figure are based on previous research, not this study's findings. The study will examine how participants experience and understand these relationships, rather than measure them directly. The framework will guide interpretation later on, rather than set strict categories for analyzing participants' stories.

Figure 1

Integrated Conceptual Framework for Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Learning



Note. SEL = social-emotional learning; RQ3 = Research Question 3. Solid arrows indicate relationships informed by prior literature; the dashed box and arrow indicate hypothesized outcomes that the proposed study will examine through participants' accounts but will not test causally.

Review of the Literature

Exclusionary Discipline and Alternative Education

The overrepresentation of Black students in suspensions and expulsions is among the most consistently documented findings in educational research. Skiba et al. (2002) found that Black students were referred to the office more often than White students for offenses requiring subjective judgment, while White students were more often referred for objective offenses such as vandalism. Experimental evidence suggests that racial stereotypes can shape how teachers respond to misbehavior: teachers in one study were more troubled by a second infraction from a student with a stereotypically Black name and more likely to recommend severe discipline (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). These patterns accumulate. Gregory et al. (2010) argued that the discipline gap and the achievement gap are two sides of the same coin because students repeatedly removed from class lose access to instruction and become less connected to school.

Alternative education placements broaden these exclusions. In a longitudinal study of one large urban district, Vanderhaar et al. (2014) found that students who received out-of-school suspensions were more likely to be placed in a disciplinary alternative school, and that alternative placement, in turn, was associated with later juvenile detention, with race remaining a significant factor along this pathway. Woods et al. (2023) attributed these outcomes to deficit-oriented perceptions of Black males and called for school psychologists and teachers to adopt strength-based approaches that support their social, behavioral, emotional, and academic success. Howard (2014) similarly argued that improving outcomes for Black males requires attention to how schools construct them as problems.

Social-Emotional Learning: Evidence and Limitations

Prior research provides substantial evidence that well-implemented SEL can improve student outcomes. Durlak et al. (2011) found that students in SEL programs showed gains in social and emotional skills, attitudes, and positive social behavior, fewer conduct problems, and

an 11-percentile-point improvement in academic achievement relative to comparison students. The same analysis found that effects depended on implementation quality. Romasz et al. (2004) reached a similar conclusion in their examination of schoolwide SEL programs in urban schools, noting that program success depended on organizational supports such as staff preparation, leadership commitment, and continuous assessment. Kurtz (2020) examined an SEL adaptation intended to address internalizing problems in an urban school and reported that when teachers prioritized SEL, both student behavior and teacher-pupil relationships improved.

Despite this evidence, schools often implement SEL inconsistently. Accountability pressures may push schools to prioritize tested subjects over social and emotional development, and limited resources, insufficient staff training, shifting administrative priorities, and frequent policy changes can undermine SEL initiatives (Brown, 2023; Romasz et al., 2004). A further limitation is conceptual. Most SEL frameworks have been developed and evaluated with limited attention to race and culture, and critics note that SEL can promote conformity to dominant norms rather than support the health of students of color (Jagers et al., 2019). For Black males, whose emotional expressions are frequently interpreted as aggression, a compliance-oriented version of self-management has the potential to reinforce rather than interrupt disciplinary disparities (Dees & Lowery, 2024).

Culturally Responsive SEL and African American Male Students

Less research examines SEL specifically with African American male students. Dees and Lowery (2024) argued that the absence of culturally grounded SEL leaves Black male students without the support they require to navigate racial stress and recommended that SEL be redesigned around their identities and experiences. In a phenomenological study at a high-poverty urban high school, Brown (2023) found that African American male students described

an SEL curriculum component as helping them improve their conduct and participation in school, and the study recommended policy changes to embed SEL in the curriculum. Love and Newsome (n.d.) described a pilot of the Student Training for Educational and Personal Success (STEPS) program, which paired SEL instruction with community mentors and focused interventions; participating Black male students reportedly showed improvements in behavior, social skills, and connectedness to school. Davis (2020) linked emotional intelligence to the stabilization of trauma among Black men, suggesting that emotional skill development may help address responses to trauma, stress, and social injustice that schools often treat as disciplinary problems. Spangler (2022) examined SEL in urban secondary band programs and described how a relationship-centered context supported students' resilience, communication skills, and positive identity development.

Gap in the Literature

Taken together, this literature indicates that exclusionary discipline disproportionately influences African American males, that SEL can improve student outcomes when implemented well, and that culturally responsive approaches may be especially important for Black male students. Three gaps remain. First, few studies examine SEL in disciplinary alternative schools, even though these settings serve the students most affected by exclusionary discipline. Second, much of the existing research relies on adult perspectives or program outcomes rather than on how Black male students themselves experience SEL. Third, studies of SEL implementation rarely examine how race and culture shape the barriers educators face. The proposed study addresses these gaps by examining the lived experience of culturally responsive SEL in an urban alternative high school from the perspectives of students, educators, and administrators.

Method

Research Design and Rationale for Phenomenology

The proposed study will use a qualitative phenomenological design, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022), conducted at a single site. Phenomenology is appropriate because the research questions ask how participants experience and make sense of culturally responsive SEL, not whether a particular program produces measurable effects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central phenomenon is participants' experience of receiving or delivering SEL in an alternative school after exclusion from a traditional school. A program evaluation or case study would treat the SEL program as the unit of analysis; phenomenology, by contrast, treats participants' experiences and meanings as the unit of analysis, consistent with CRT's devotion to counter-storytelling.

IPA was selected to approach the phenomenological approach for three reasons. First, IPA is idiographic: it analyzes each participant's account in depth before examining patterns across participants, protecting the individual voices of students who are often described only in aggregate discipline statistics. Second, IPA recognizes a double hermeneutic, in which the researcher interprets participants' efforts to make sense of their own experiences (Smith et al., 2022). This position is more realistic for a researcher with long professional experience in the field than transcendental phenomenology, which asks the researcher to set aside prior knowledge through bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). IPA instead asks the researcher to make that knowledge explicit and to examine its influence, as described under Researcher Reflexivity. Third, IPA supports multiperspectival designs, in which the same phenomenon is examined from the standpoint of different but related groups (Larkin et al., 2019). This allows the study to examine

students' lived experience (Research Question 1) alongside educators' and administrators' experience of enacting SEL and encountering barriers (Research Questions 2 and 3).

Interviews and focus groups will provide the primary phenomenological data. Classroom observations, a brief questionnaire, and school documents will support the study by describing the context, informing interview prompts, and situating participants' accounts, but they will not be analyzed as experiential data in their own right. The study is non-experimental and is not designed to estimate the effects of SEL.

Setting

The study will take place in an alternative high school in the Southeastern region, one of the largest urban school districts in the United States, serving approximately 140,415 students in 184 schools (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2024). The district's student body is racially and ethnically diverse and includes substantial populations of English learners and students with disabilities. District data show pronounced disparities in discipline: Black students received short-term suspensions at a rate of approximately 299.86 per 1,000 students and were reported to experience bullying and harassment at a rate of 22.40 per 1,000 students (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2024). The district profile does not disaggregate these data by gender, but national research indicates that Black males account for a disproportionate share of exclusionary discipline (Skiba et al., 2002). The researcher will identify the school by a pseudonym and will not hold an instructional, supervisory, or disciplinary role at the study site. Before interviews begin, the researcher will document the school's SEL curriculum, the instructional time allotted to SEL, and the staff responsible for delivering it, so that readers can judge the transferability of the findings.

Participants and Sampling

Participants will be selected through purposive criterion sampling, which IPA uses to recruit a relatively homogeneous group for whom the research question is personally meaningful (Smith et al., 2022). The study will include two participant groups.

Students. The study will recruit eight to 10 African American male students. Inclusion criteria are (a) enrollment in Grades 9 through 12, (b) age 15 to 18, (c) placement at the alternative school following a disciplinary referral, (d) enrollment at the school for at least 30 school days, and (e) participation in the school's SEL instruction during that time. If more students volunteer than we can interview, we will select participants to vary by grade level and length of enrollment.

Educators and administrators. We will recruit four to six adults, including teachers who deliver SEL, counselors or social workers who support it, and at least one administrator who oversees it. Inclusion criteria are at least one semester of SEL-related work at the school.

These sample sizes reflect IPA's emphasis on in-depth analysis over large numbers of participants (Smith et al., 2022). The principle of information power means fewer participants are needed when the study has a clear focus, participants match the research questions, and interviews provide detailed information (Malterud et al., 2016). The goal is not to reach statistical saturation or generalize, but to create a detailed interpretation of shared experiences.

Recruitment, Consent, and Assent

Recruitment will begin only after the researcher's university institutional review board (IRB) and the district's research review office approve the study, and after the school principal provides written permission. To avoid pressuring students, a designated staff member, such as a counselor with no role in student discipline, will handle recruitment. The researcher will present the study during an advisory period, and the staff member will distribute information packets that

include a family letter in the family's preferred language. Families and students will be invited to contact the researcher with questions.

For students younger than 18, written permission will be obtained from a parent or guardian and written assent from the student. Students who are 18 will provide their own written consent. The researcher will invite educators and administrators individually by email (not through their supervisors) and will obtain written consent. The principal will not be told which staff members participate, except for administrators who participate themselves. All participants will be told that participation is voluntary, that they may skip any question or opt out at any time without penalty, and that their decision will have no effect on grades, discipline status, transition to their home school, or employment.

Data Collection Procedures

Data will be collected over approximately 12 weeks in one semester. Table 1 shows each data source's role and the research questions it informs, and Table 2 shows the planned sequence.

Table 1

Data Sources, Their Role in the Analysis, and the Research Questions They Inform

Data source	Participants or materials	Role	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Individual interviews	8–10 students	Primary	✓		✓
Focus groups	2 groups of 4–5 students	Primary	✓		✓
Individual interviews	4–6 educators and administrators	Primary		✓	✓
Classroom observations	8 SEL sessions (1 per week)	Contextual	✓	✓	✓
Questionnaire	Student participants	Contextual	✓		
Documents	Curriculum, lesson plans, policies, aggregate discipline data	Contextual		✓	✓

Note. RQ = research question; SEL = social-emotional learning. We analyze primary sources using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Contextual sources describe the setting and inform interview probes but are not analyzed as experiential data.

Student Questionnaire. At enrollment, each student participant will complete a brief questionnaire administered through Zoho Survey (Appendix C). It collects grade level, age, and length of enrollment, along with a small number of items on how often SEL lessons relate to the student's cultural background, how supported the student feels, and how connected he feels to school. Each rated item is followed by an open-ended prompt. Because the sample is small and purposive, responses will be used only to describe participants and to customize interview probes; they will not be used for statistical inference.

Classroom Observations. The researcher will observe one SEL lesson or advisory session per week for eight weeks (eight observations total), each lasting the full session, typically 30 to 50 minutes. Observations will be nonparticipant and recorded as handwritten field notes, not audio or video. A structured protocol will guide attention to seven indicators: active involvement and engagement, emotional expression, interaction between peers and with teachers, application of SEL skills, cultural appropriateness and inclusivity, behavioral indicators, and social and emotional reflection. Field notes will describe the practices of consenting educators and the participation of consenting students only; no identifying information about non-participating students will be recorded. Observations will begin before interviews so that the researcher can ask participants about specific lessons.

Individual Interviews. Each student will complete one semi-structured interview (45 to 60 minutes), and each educator or administrator will complete one semi-structured interview (45 to 60 minutes). Interviews will take place in a private room at school at a time agreed upon with

the participant and will be audio-recorded with permission. The protocols (Appendices A and B) use open, non-leading questions which invite participants to describe concrete experiences in their own words, with follow-up probes such as "Can you give me an example?" and "What was that like for you?" Consistent with IPA, the interviewer will follow topics participants raise rather than rigidly adhering to the question order.

Student Focus Groups. After individual interviews, the researchers will hold two focus groups of four to five student participants each, each lasting about 60 minutes. Focus groups will explore common experiences of SEL, culture, and race that may emerge more readily in conversation among peers. Participants will agree to ground rules, including keeping others' comments confidential, but the researcher will remind them that they cannot guarantee other members will do so. Focus groups will be audio-recorded.

Documents. The researcher will collect SEL curriculum materials, sample lesson plans, the school's discipline policies, and aggregate, de-identified discipline data. Documents will describe how the school formally defines and positions SEL and will provide context for participants' accounts.

Table 2

Planned Data Collection Timeline

Weeks	Activities
Before study	IRB, district, and principal approval; researcher positionality statement and reflexive interview with peer debriefer
1–2	Information session; distribution of permission, assent, and consent forms; document collection; student questionnaire
3–10	Weekly classroom observations (eight total)
4–9	Individual interviews with students and with educators and administrators; transcription and case-by-case analysis begin
10–11	Two student focus groups
12	Member reflection on summaries of themes; completion of data collection

Note. IRB = Institutional Review Board. Analysis will continue after data collection ends.

Data Analysis

The researcher will transcribe interviews and focus groups verbatim, check transcripts against recordings for accuracy, and de-identify them before analysis. The researcher will analyze individual interviews using the IPA process described by Smith et al. (2022). The researcher will (a) read and re-read each transcript while listening to the recording; (b) write exploratory notes on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual features of the account; (c) construct experiential statements that convey the meaning of segments of the transcript; (d) search for connections among those statements; and (e) organize them into personal experiential themes for that participant. The researcher will fully analyze each transcript before beginning the next, to preserve the idiographic focus. The researcher will then (f) compare personal experiential themes across participants to develop group experiential themes, noting both shared patterns and important differences.

Following the multiperspectival approach described by Larkin et al. (2019), the researcher will first analyze student and adult interviews as separate groups. We will then compare the two sets of group experiential themes to identify where students' and adults' accounts of SEL converge and diverge, addressing the relationship among Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. The study will analyze focus group transcripts using the dual-phase approach developed by Palmer et al. (2010), first attending to group interaction and shared positions, then to individual speakers' experiential claims. Focus group themes will test and enrich the group experiential themes from individual interviews.

The conceptual framework will be applied deliberately and later. Participants' personal experiential themes will be developed from their own words, without coding to predetermined

categories. The analysis will draw on CRT, culturally relevant pedagogy, and transformative SEL to develop group experiential themes and inform discussion, helping interpret patterns such as experiences of deficit framing or identity affirmation. The study will consult observation field notes, questionnaire responses, and documents to contextualize interpretations, for example by comparing the SEL practices educators describe with practices noted in lessons. Qualitative data analysis software will organize transcripts, notes, and theme tables, and the audit trail will record all analytic decisions.

Planned Reporting of Findings

The findings will be shared as group themes for each research question, using direct quotes from several participants to help readers judge the interpretation. A table will show which participants contributed to each theme, and the study will include accounts that do not fit the main themes. The study will report student and adult perspectives separately before comparing them. The results will reflect participants' experiences in this one setting and will not generalize to all African American males or all alternative schools.

Quality and Trustworthiness

The study will use Yardley's (2000) four principles to judge quality, as is common in IPA research. Sensitivity to context will be shown by considering the social and cultural setting, being careful about power differences between the adult researcher and students with discipline histories, and using participants' own words in interpretations. Commitment and rigor will come from spending a full semester at the site, choosing participants with direct experience, and thoroughly analyzing each case. Transparency and congruence will be ensured by keeping a clear record of each analytic step and including quotes so readers can see how the data support the findings. The study will show its impact by reporting practical and policy consequences from the

findings. Participants will receive a brief summary of the themes related to their accounts and can provide feedback. Because IPA findings rely on the researcher's interpretation, this feedback will help identify misunderstandings and add participants' views without requiring agreement. A peer debriefer with a different background will review some transcripts and theme tables and challenge the interpretations.

Ethical Protections

Because the study involves minors who have experienced school discipline and will discuss race and bias, several additional protections will be in place. First, all names will be replaced by pseudonyms, and identifying details, including names of other students or staff mentioned in interviews, will be removed from transcripts. Second, the district has a small number of alternative schools, so the school could be identifiable; to reduce this risk, educators will be described by general role (for example, "teacher" or "student support staff") rather than by specific title, subject, or years of experience, and demographic information will be reported only in aggregate. Third, the researcher will delete audio recordings after verifying transcripts and will store transcripts, consent forms, and field notes on an encrypted, password-protected drive, with consent forms stored separately from the data. Fourth, participants will be told before the interview about the limits of confidentiality, including the researcher's duty to report suspected abuse or a risk of serious harm. The interviewer will not ask about specific disciplinary incidents or illegal behavior and will redirect the conversation if a student begins to disclose such details. Fifth, a school counselor will be available, and the researcher will follow a distress protocol: if a participant becomes upset, the interview will be paused, and the participant will be offered the choice to take a break, end the interview, or speak with the counselor. Finally, the

researcher will not report any information a participant shares to school staff in a way that could affect the participant's grades, discipline status, or employment.

Researcher Reflexivity

In IPA, the researcher's understanding is part of the interpretive process, so reflexivity requires making that understanding visible rather than claiming to set it aside (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher has worked with African American males in education for 24 years and has raised an African American son. This background likely supports rapport with students and families and sharpens attention to experiences outsiders could miss. It also creates specific risks. The researcher may expect culturally responsive SEL to be beneficial and may attend more closely to accounts that confirm that expectation. As a professional educator, the researcher may also identify with educators' accounts of barriers or, alternatively, with students' accounts of unfair treatment, and either identification could shape interpretation. In addition, students with discipline histories may view any school-system adult as an authority figure and may give answers they believe the researcher wants to hear.

To address these risks, the researcher will take several steps. Before collecting data, the researcher will write a statement about their own position and record a reflexive interview with the peer debriefer to discuss personal beliefs about SEL, discipline, and African American male students. Throughout the study, the researcher will keep a journal after each interview and observation, noting first impressions, assumptions, and possible biases. During analysis, the researcher will look for stories that challenge expectations and include them in the report. To reduce power differences, the researcher will introduce themselves as an independent researcher, not a school employee, tell students there are no right or wrong answers, and let students choose where to sit and whether to start with casual conversation.

Literature-Based Propositions

Because no data have been collected, this section does not report findings. The propositions below are expectations derived from the literature and the conceptual framework. They are stated so that readers can see how prior scholarship informs the study and so that the eventual findings can be compared with them. Consistent with IPA, the propositions will not be used as coding categories, and will report evidence that contradicts them.

Proposition 1 (Research Question 1). Prior research suggests that students may describe SEL as more meaningful when it connects to their racial and cultural identities and lived experiences, and as irrelevant or punitive when it is framed mainly as behavior management. This expectation follows from transformative SEL's emphasis on identity and agency (Jagers et al., 2019) and from evidence that culturally relevant instruction strengthens engagement and belonging (Cruse, 2019).

Proposition 2 (Research Questions 1 and 2). Prior research suggests that relationships with culturally competent adults may be the main channel through which students experience SEL as supportive. Kurtz (2020) and Love and Newsome (n.d.) both reported that SEL strengthened relationships between students and adults, and culturally relevant pedagogy positions those relationships as central to learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Proposition 3 (Research Question 2). The literature suggests that educators may differ in how they understand culturally responsive SEL, with some enacting it as identity-affirming instruction and others as a set of self-control strategies. This variation reflects the tension between transformative and compliance-oriented SEL described by Dees and Lowery (2024) and Jagers et al. (2019).

Proposition 4 (Research Question 3). Prior studies identify barriers that may also appear in this setting, including limited professional development, competing academic and accountability priorities, staff turnover, and a disciplinary culture that frames SEL as a consequence rather than a support. Short student enrollment periods may also be a barrier specific to alternative schools. Prior work identifies facilitators such as leadership commitment, protected time for SEL, and partnerships with families and community mentors (Love & Newsome, n.d.; Romasz et al., 2004).

Students may also describe SEL as having little influence on their experiences, or value it for reasons unrelated to culture. Such accounts would be informative because they would indicate that culturally responsive SEL design in alternative settings needs reconsideration.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, because it is a single-site phenomenological study with a small, targeted sample, the findings are not meant to be statistically generalizable to other alternative schools or all African American male students. Whether the results apply elsewhere will depend on how well the setting and participants are described. Second, IPA findings are based on the researcher's interpretation. While reflexive practices and peer review can make this influence clear, they cannot remove it. Third, the study depends on what participants say, and students or staff may describe SEL more positively or negatively depending on their relationship with the school or the researcher. Fourth, focus groups may favor the most outspoken participants, and an observer in the classroom may change how people behave. Fifth, requiring parental permission may underrepresent students with less family involvement. Sixth, students in alternative schools may attend for short periods, which could result in some leaving before all interviews or focus groups are completed. Seventh, even with protections, the district's

small number of alternative schools means the site could still be identified. Finally, the study can describe how participants see the relationship between SEL and their behavior, engagement, and discipline, but it cannot prove that SEL caused any changes.

Implications for Urban Education

The study is designed to produce implications at several levels of the urban education system. The implications below describe the kinds of guidance the study is expected to offer; final recommendations will depend on the findings.

For classroom practice, the study is expected to identify concrete ways teachers can teach SEL competencies through students' cultural identities, such as connecting self-awareness lessons to racial identity, using culturally familiar examples and texts, and treating students' emotional expressions as information rather than as defiance. These insights may inform professional development for teachers in both alternative and traditional schools.

For school leadership, the study is expected to clarify the organizational conditions that enable consistent implementation of culturally responsive SEL, including protected instructional time, sustained training, and alignment between SEL goals and discipline procedures. Leaders in alternative schools may also use the findings to strengthen transition plans so SEL supports students receive continue when they return to their home schools.

For district policy, the study is expected to inform efforts to lessen reliance on exclusionary discipline. If students and educators describe SEL as most effective when it replaces, rather than accompanies, punitive responses, the findings would support policies that limit removals for subjective offenses and fund culturally responsive SEL as a preventive strategy before students are referred to alternative placements.

For families and communities, the study is expected to identify roles for families, community mentors, and community organizations in culturally responsive SEL. Programs such as STEPS suggest that community mentors can extend school-based SEL to Black male students (Love & Newsome, n.d.), and the findings may show how to build such partnerships in urban alternative schools.

For research, the study offers a framework and data collection instruments that can be adapted for multisite or longitudinal studies of culturally responsive SEL. Upcoming studies might compare alternative and traditional schools, follow students after they return to their home schools, or use mixed methods designs to examine relationships between culturally responsive SEL and discipline and achievement outcomes.

Conclusion

African American males are removed from traditional schools and placed in alternative settings at higher rates than others, but there is little research on how these students experience SEL after being excluded. This paper proposes a phenomenological study, using critical race theory, culturally relevant teaching, and progressive SEL, to explore how culturally responsive SEL is experienced, practiced, and limited in an urban alternative high school. By focusing on the stories of Black male students and the adults who work with them, the study aims to give teachers and administrators evidence to help make SEL a source of support and affirmation, not just another form of control.

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Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

The interview will begin with a review of assent or consent, the limits of confidentiality, a note that there are no right or wrong answers, and permission to record. Students will be reminded that they will not be asked about specific disciplinary incidents. Follow-up probes (e.g., "Can you give me an example?" "What was that like for you?") will be used as needed, and question order will follow the conversation.

- Tell me about how you came to this school and what it has been like for you so far.
- Describe the social-emotional learning lessons or activities you have taken part in here. What do they usually look like?
- Think about a recent lesson or activity that stood out to you. What happened, and what was it like for you?
- How, if at all, have these lessons affected how you handle your emotions, build relationships, or cope with stress? Can you give an example?
- How well do these lessons reflect your culture, background, and experiences outside of school? Can you share a specific example?
- What does it mean to you when a lesson connects, or does not connect, to who you are as a young Black man?
- Describe a time when you felt that an adult at school understood and respected your background. Describe a time when you did not.
- What has kept social-emotional learning from working for you or other students here?
- If you could redesign social-emotional learning for students like you, what would you change?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences?

Appendix B

Educator and Administrator Interview Protocol

The interview will begin with a review of consent, the limits of confidentiality, and permission to record. Participants will be reminded that their supervisor will not be told whether they participated.

- Describe your role and how you are involved in social-emotional learning at this school.
- What does culturally responsive social-emotional learning mean to you? How, if at all, is it different from social-emotional learning in general?
- Walk me through a recent lesson or interaction in which you addressed social-emotional skills with African American male students. What did you do, what was it like for you, and how did students respond?
- How do students' cultural identities and experiences of race show up in your social-emotional learning work?
- What training, resources, or support have you received for social-emotional learning? What has been most and least helpful?
- What makes it difficult to implement social-emotional learning effectively here? What makes it easier?
- How do social-emotional learning and the school's discipline practices relate to each other in your experience?
- What would you recommend to improve social-emotional learning for African American male students in alternative settings?

Appendix C

Student Questionnaire Items

Section 1 collects grade level, age, and length of enrollment at the school. Items 1–5 use a 5-point response scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always), and each is followed by the open-ended prompt "Please explain your answer." Items 6–8 are open-ended. Responses are used to describe participants and to customize interview probes.

- How often do social-emotional learning lessons relate to your cultural background?
- How often do social-emotional learning lessons help you manage your emotions at school?
- How often do teachers and staff understand and respect your cultural background during social-emotional learning activities?
- How often are you supported at school when you face racial bias or discrimination?
- How often do you feel connected to your school community?
- Which social-emotional learning strategies make you feel most supported?
- What gets in the way of social-emotional learning working for students like you?
- What role, if any, does pride in your culture play in how you engage with social-emotional learning?

The Access Innovator Framework: Evaluating Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools for Pedagogical Impact, Ethical Care, and Practical Adoption in Education

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Artificial intelligence is entering educational spaces faster than many institutions can evaluate, govern, or support its use. Faculty, school leaders, and academic administrators are being asked to make decisions about AI tools based on vendor promises, convenience, efficiency, or fear of falling behind. These pressures create a need for a practical but scholarly framework that asks deeper questions: Does the tool improve learning? Does it protect students and faculty? Does it expand access or create new barriers? Can educators realistically use it with the time, training, and resources available? This proceeding paper introduces the **Access Innovator Framework**, an access-centered and outcomes-driven model for evaluating AI tools in education. The framework supports educators, programs, and institutions in moving beyond tool excitement toward responsible, evidence-informed AI adoption.

The purpose of the Access Innovator Framework is to provide a clear method for evaluating AI tools through three core domains: **Pedagogical Impact, Responsible Use, and Practicality**. The framework is designed for teacher education, higher education, K–12 professional development, curriculum redesign, accreditation work, and institutional AI planning. Its central claim is that trustworthy AI in education must be pedagogically meaningful, ethically responsible, practically adoptable, and connected to measurable outcomes.

The framework is inspired by major theories of learning, technology integration, ethics, and innovation adoption. Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), provides a central foundation because it argues that effective technology integration happens at the

intersection of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and technological knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). The Access Innovator Framework builds from this idea but extends it for the AI era by adding explicit attention to access, ethics of care, implementation practicality, and institutional evidence (Gilligan, 1982). In other words, the framework does not ask only whether a tool is powerful. It asks whether the tool is instructionally useful, ethically sound, and realistic for educators to implement.

The first domain, **Pedagogical Impact**, examines whether an AI tool supports meaningful learning, student thinking, instructional alignment, and cognitive growth. This domain draws from Bloom's Taxonomy and the revised taxonomy, which remain useful for examining whether learning tasks move students from basic recall toward higher levels of understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bloom et al., 1956). In this domain, an AI tool is judged by its contribution to teaching and learning, not by novelty alone. A strong tool should help faculty design better instruction, help students engage content more deeply, or help programs assess learning more effectively.

The second domain, **Responsible Use**, examines fairness, bias, privacy, transparency, care, and human accountability. This domain is grounded in the belief that education is relational and that technology must not remove the professional responsibility of educators. Noddings' (1984) ethics of care is especially important because it centers responsibility, responsiveness, relationship, and the dignity of the learner. In the Access Innovator Framework, the guiding ethical question is not simply, "Does this AI tool work?" The deeper question is, "Who does this tool care for, who might it harm or ignore, and what human judgment must remain in place?" This domain also requires attention to students who may be most vulnerable to poorly designed

AI use, including students from underrepresented backgrounds, first-generation students, adult learners, rural students, and students with limited access to technology.

The third domain, **Practicality**, examines whether the tool can be adopted with the time, cost, training, infrastructure, policy, and support available in real educational settings.

Practicality is not a minor concern; it is an access and equity issue. A tool may be instructionally strong, but if it requires expensive licensing, advanced technical skill, or support that only some programs possess, it may widen existing gaps. This domain is informed by technology acceptance and diffusion literature, including Davis' (1989) work on perceived usefulness and ease of use and Rogers' (2003) work on how innovations spread through organizations. For AI adoption to be sustainable, educators must be able to understand the tool, trust the tool, receive support, and connect the tool to their actual teaching responsibilities.

The intersections of the three domains create additional evaluative value. The intersection of Pedagogical Impact and Responsible Use produces **Ethical Pedagogy**, which asks whether learning benefits are achieved without sacrificing student dignity, fairness, or agency. The intersection of Responsible Use and Practicality produces **Sustainable Access**, which asks whether implementation is equitable across different faculty, student, and institutional contexts. The intersection of Practicality and Pedagogical Impact produces **Transformative Practice**, which asks whether the tool changes teaching and learning in ways that are both meaningful and usable. At the center of the framework is the intended outcome: **trustworthy, equitable, and effective AI**.

This work is presented as a conceptual and design-based framework development study. The methodology is informed by design-based research because the framework was developed to address a real problem of practice: how educators and leaders can evaluate AI tools responsibly

before and during adoption. Design-based research is appropriate because it allows theory, practice, design, implementation, and revision to interact in authentic educational settings (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). The framework also reflects practitioner inquiry because it emerged from leadership work involving faculty professional development, curriculum design, AI tool evaluation, accreditation thinking, and institutional decision-making.

The development process followed four phases. First, relevant literature was reviewed across technology integration, cognitive learning theory, constructivism, social constructivism, ethics of care, technology acceptance, and innovation diffusion. Constructivist and social constructivist perspectives were included because AI tools should be evaluated in relation to how learners construct meaning and how learning is shaped by tools, language, culture, and social interaction (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Second, recurring problems of AI adoption were identified, including tool overload, limited evaluation criteria, unclear evidence of learning impact, privacy concerns, uneven faculty readiness, and lack of institutional guidance. Third, these problems were translated into framework domains and guiding questions. Fourth, the framework was refined into a practical evaluation model that can support faculty workshops, program-level decision-making, and institutional AI planning. This conceptual synthesis was not a systematic review; no formal search protocol or inclusion counts are reported. Recurring concerns were grouped around learning value (Pedagogical Impact), fairness and accountability (Responsible Use), and adoption conditions (Practicality). Their overlap informed the intersections.

As an illustrative application, consider an AI feedback tool for a teacher education writing assignment. The unit of analysis is the tool in that instructional use, not the product alone. For Pedagogical Impact, faculty would ask whether feedback strengthens candidate

reasoning. For Responsible Use, they would examine privacy, bias, disclosure, and faculty oversight. For Practicality, they would examine cost, access, training, and support. Judgments are qualitative; validated scoring weights and cutoffs have not been established. A serious privacy concern would prevent adoption until safeguards are in place, despite possible instructional benefits. This hypothetical example illustrates decisions, not observed performance or student outcomes.

The findings from this framework development are presented as emergent design findings, not empirical evidence that framework use improves learning outcomes. The first finding is that educators need an AI evaluation model that begins with learning rather than technology. When AI tools are introduced through features alone, faculty conversations often focus on speed, automation, or convenience. The Access Innovator Framework redirects the conversation toward instructional purpose by asking what learning problem is being solved, what student thinking is being strengthened, and what evidence will show that the tool worked.

The second finding is that ethical evaluation must be relational and not only procedural. Privacy, bias, and compliance are necessary, but they are not enough. Responsible AI use in education also requires care, judgment, and accountability. The framework positions care as a design principle by asking whether AI use strengthens or weakens trust, whether students remain visible as whole people, and whether educators remain responsible for interpretation and decision-making.

The third finding is that practicality must be treated as part of access and equity. If a tool cannot be implemented across different programs, faculty skill levels, student populations, or institutional resource levels, then its promise is limited. Practicality helps determine whether AI

adoption is sustainable or whether it becomes another innovation that benefits only those with the most support.

The scholarly significance of the Access Innovator Framework is that it bridges theory and practice for AI adoption in education. It extends the spirit of TPACK into the generative AI era by adding access, equity, ethics, practicality, and outcomes as explicit evaluation categories. It also offers institutions a shared language for judging AI tools before they are widely adopted. Over time, the framework can support an institutional evidence base by documenting which tools were evaluated, how they scored, what risks were identified, and what supports are needed for responsible use. Future research should test the reliability of the framework, compare AI tool ratings across disciplines, examine faculty adoption patterns, and study the relationship between framework-guided AI adoption and student learning outcomes. The long-term goal is to support AI adoption that is access-centered, outcomes-driven, pedagogically grounded, ethically caring, and practically sustainable. No formal expert review, pilot ratings, or empirical validation are reported. Rapid changes in AI products, policy, and institutional capacity require local review and periodic reassessment.

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Supporting Neurodiverse College Students: A Duoethnographic Perspective

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Abstract

As more neurodiverse students enter higher education, faculty need the knowledge, skills, and institutional support to design inclusive and accessible learning. The authors (two faculty members, one with a Ph.D. in Digital Media and one with a Ph.D. in Special Education) used duoethnography to compare training, experiences, and perceived readiness to support neurodiverse students at two Midwestern liberal arts colleges. While educators outside of special education often report limited preparation and confidence for supporting students with disabilities, special education teachers bring specialized expertise that is frequently misunderstood and/or underutilized. The dialogue between these two educators resulted in the emergence and identification of four interrelated tensions: uneven faculty preparation in disability, accessibility, and inclusive pedagogy; the need to frame learner variability as expected rather than exceptional; a sharp change during the K-12-to-college transition in student support and self-advocacy expectations, as well as faculty understanding; and the central role of faculty-student relationships. In this paper, we translate these findings into actionable recommendations for faculty and student preparation and development, institutionalized support, and future research.

Background/Rationale

Neurodiversity is a term widely used to encompass variations in how people learn, engage, communicate, and process the world, including but not limited to: Autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia, as well as mental health differences like bipolar and anxiety “disorders” (Cleveland Clinic, 2022; Northwestern Medicine, 2024). An estimated 20–25% of college students report a neurodivergence (Accardo et al., 2024; Dwyer et al., 2023), and identification rates continue to rise.

At the same time, research suggests there are over- and under-represented populations identified with neurodiversities, as significant inequities and structural barriers exist in each step of the identification-to-support process, strongly shaped by factors including race, socioeconomic status, gender, and language (Kim et al., 2025; Weiss et al., 2024). These inequities can be further exacerbated because of stigma, different understandings of “typical,” and a lack of culturally and linguistically responsive diagnosis and care models (Bozinovic et al., 2021; Chronis-Tuscano & Bounoua, 2024; Malik-Soni et al., 2021; Morgan & Hu., 2023). As such, it is not uncommon to see an underrepresentation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities in formal diagnoses of neurodiversity. We also see overrepresentation of the same population of students in disciplinary actions related to behaviors that would, in other contexts, be viewed as manifestations of neurodiversity (Nair et al., 2024). Subsequent tensions can include lack of formal identification (often resulting in overly punitive responses), late diagnoses that limits access to early interventions and supports, and a cultural mismatch across the full educational experience (Botha et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2018). The large variability in access to adequate resources for identification and support contribute to educational inequities for neurodiverse students, including lower academic performance and graduation rates; poorer

mental and physical health, including higher levels of anxiety and depression; more limited social integration and sense of belonging; and higher rates of bullying (Bakker et al., 2019; Butcher & Lane, 2025; McLeod et al., 2019).

As the population of neurodiverse post-secondary students -- particularly those experiencing other inequities -- grows, institutions of higher education face a persistent readiness gap. Many faculty, especially outside education-related fields, receive little formal preparation in pedagogy, disability awareness, accommodations, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), or the services available through disability-support offices. Further, many faculty have not been trained in culturally responsive and/or sustaining pedagogies (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2020, 2023), let alone a theoretical framework such as Dis/Ability Critical Race (Dis/Crit) Studies (Annamma et al., 2013). In particular, Dis/Crit as a lens can help instructors recognize and examine how racism and ableism intersect to shape common classroom practices, often focusing on “fixing” individual students rather than redesigning instruction and instructional spaces for more equitable learning for all. Unless their training is in a directly related field, most faculty report feeling unprepared to meet neurodivergent students' instructional needs (Hutchinson, 2025), largely due to limited exposure during their own graduate training (Shine & Stefanou, 2022). Unfortunately, faculty who are unversed in theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013) may inadvertently reinforce existing inequities for neurodiverse students of the global majority.

This study grew out of a collaboration: Author A, a content expert with no training in pedagogy, seeking to make sense of her own uncertainty in the classroom, reaching out to Author B, a trained special educator with extensive experience working in public and charter schools in three urban centers: Philadelphia, Chicago, and Milwaukee. The pair engaged in

duoethnographic research centered a dialogue between a faculty member who entered higher education without this preparation and a faculty member with formal special education training, seeking to better understand how their preparation and experience shaped their perceived capacity to support neurodiverse college students. After coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017; Sawyer & Norris, 2012), the co-authors identified potential recommendations and actionable steps that could improve learning experiences for both neurodiverse students and their instructors.

Method

The two co-authors served as researcher-participants in a duoethnographic inquiry, a dialogic methodology in which each researcher serves as both participant and site of inquiry (Sawyer & Norris, 2012, 2015). The authors sought to examine their training, experiences, and perceived needs related to supporting neurodiverse college students at two liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. As researcher-participants with divergent training and experiences and a shared commitment to effectively serving neurodiverse students, this methodology allowed the authors to critically examine how those differing positionalities and histories shaped each author's respective understanding of the topics while simultaneously inviting reflexive transformation.

This methodology was chosen because the topic itself is deeply connected to identity, professional experience, and socially situated meaning-making. Duoethnography positions each researcher as the site of inquiry, engaging collaboratively to reconceptualize meanings, treating difference as generative, positioning divergent experiences as opportunities for transformation, reflexivity, and new understandings through dialogue rather than seeking consensus (Sawyer & Norris, 2012).

It is important to note that the findings presented here have inherent limitations regarding transferability, applicability, and interpretation. The two-person researcher-participant structure itself presents issues of perspective and bias. While both authors share a commitment to serving neurodivergent students, they are also professionally proximate to the topic, which likely shaped the course of the dialogue, the tensions that surfaced, and the results of the thematic analysis that was conducted. As such, the findings should not be presumed to be statistically generalizable, as they reflect a small sample of two authors whose training histories, institutional contexts, and sociocultural positions may differ from those of other practitioners.

Data were generated through a series of recorded conversations that were transcribed and analyzed. The authors regularly engaged in reflexive examination of different positionalities and experiences, which informed interpretations and shaped their understanding of neurodiversity, accommodations and accessibility, and inclusive teaching. Following duoethnographic principles, analysis did not seek consensus or singular interpretation; instead, attention was given to moments of tension, divergence, vulnerability, and reconceptualization. The authors identified evolving understandings, shifts in perspective, and reconstructed meanings related to the phenomenon under study (Burleigh & Burm, 2022). Reliability and trustworthiness in duoethnography is not grounded in replicability or objectivity; this study centered firmly on transparency, reflexivity, relational accountability, and authenticity of engagement.

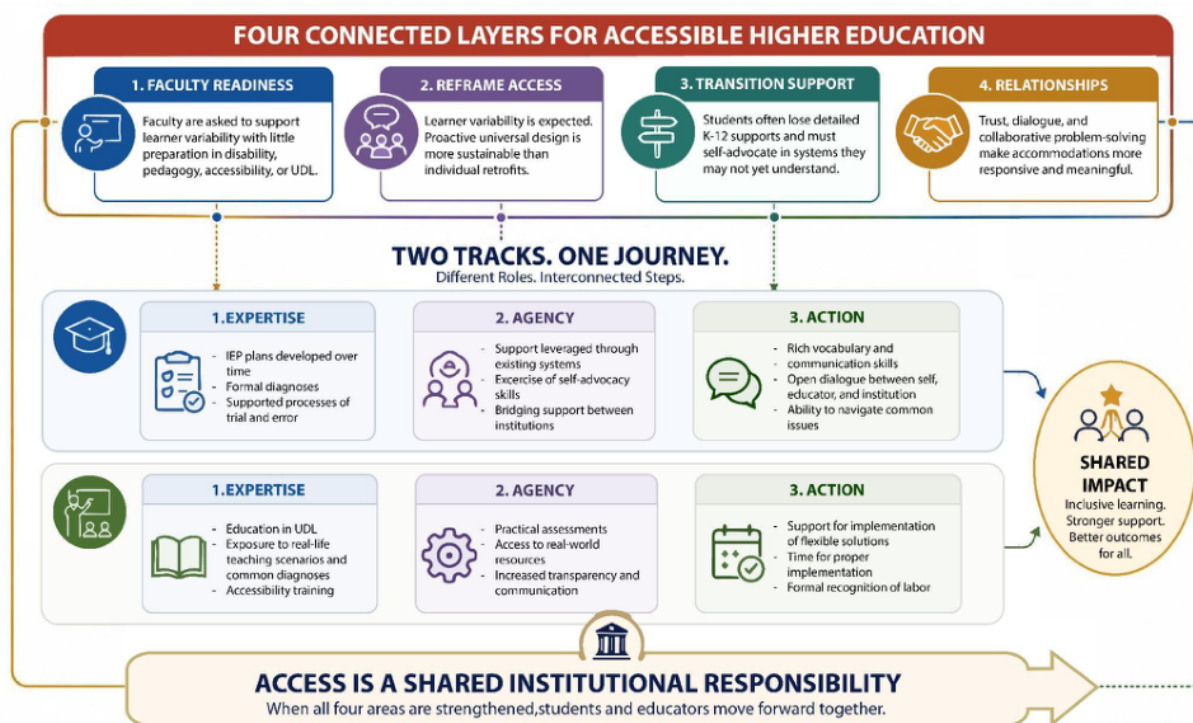
Findings: A Shared Roadmap

Through the iterative dialogic analysis of co-authors' duoethnographic conversations described above, four interrelated *tensions* emerged. Consistent with duoethnographic methodology (Sawyer & Lund, 2013; Sawyer & Norris, 2015), these tensions were not treated as fixed categories, but rather as sites of co-construction where participants interrogated their

personal experiences, challenged assumptions, and developed shared understandings of neurodiversity, accessibility, and higher education. The four major *tensions* that were identified additionally contained two parallel sets of identifiable *roles*, with interconnected steps that faculty and neurodiverse students could potentially benefit from. These tensions and roles are summarized in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Summary of Findings From Duoethnographic Research



Discussion

Within each *tension* that emerged through analysis (faculty readiness, reframing access, transition supports, and relationships), parallel and interconnected *roles* (expertise, agency, and action) rose to relevance. In addition, a great deal of nuance related to supporting students from the global majority can be considered within each *tension* and *role*. For example, as it pertains to faculty expertise, both authors noted a lack of pedagogical training and skill-building for

educating neurodiverse students. This is a particularly problematic barrier to those faculty who are not trained in education. This training gap extends to practices that address the intersectionality of disability and race, socioeconomic status, gender, and language, which further impact neurodiverse student experiences. For example, few non-educational faculty receive training in culturally responsive and/or sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2020, 2023), and/or in the intersectional nature of disability, race, socio-economic status, gender, and language. This increases the chances that the pedagogy that might be employed may create neurodiverse-specific barriers, which also reflect and are compounded by culturally unsustainable practices, such as an overreliance on oral-*only* modalities (e.g. lecture-heavy course structure).

Further, without training in critical theories such as Dis/Crit (Annamma et al., 2013), faculty may perpetuate the overly punitive approach to “atypical” behaviors that are actually examples of neurodiverse or culturally specific behaviors. A common example of this would be “*cooperative overlap*” – a conversational style where a listener/student speaks simultaneously with the main speaker/instructor. Faculty who have been trained to view classroom interactions through a lens of Dis/Crit theory will recognize that students speaking while the instructor speaks may *not* be intending to “disrespect,” cut them off, or be rude, but rather do so in order to show enthusiastic engagement, shared excitement, rapport, and/or active agreement (Tannen, 2021).

Similarly, in exploring the second *role* (agency), the premise that learner variability is not an exception to be accommodated, but rather an expected and inherent feature of humanity, faculty preparation, must include intentional consideration of the systemic, institutional, and interpersonal forces that shape students’ educational experiences. This preparation must include

developing an understanding of how ableism, racism, cultural and linguistic bias, gendered expectations, socioeconomic inequities, and other forms of discrimination can influence how learner differences are interpreted, supported, and valued. Rather than positioning neurodivergence, disability, cultural difference, or other forms of learner variability as problems located solely within individual students, faculty can be supported in examining how institutional structures, instructional practices, interpersonal interactions and classroom norms may themselves create or intensify barriers to participation and learning.

It is critical that the conversation be shifted away from a “fix-what-is-wrong” mindset toward one that is open to considerations regarding how environment, instruction, and interaction may be creating barriers to student (and teacher) success. Such a shift could contribute to a positive movement away from the predominantly medical model of disability, in which difference is located within the individual and framed primarily in terms of deficit and remediation (often perpetuated by white supremacist (Okun, 2001) and ableist (Hehir, 2002) models), toward more neurodiversity-affirming perspectives and practices. When faculty learn to anticipate learner variability and understand its systemic and contextual roots, they are better positioned to engage in proactive planning, as opposed to relying on individual accommodations or expecting students to continually disclose, self-advocate, and adapt to structures that were not designed with their participation in mind. The same reframing can be applied to tensions three and four, *transition support* and *relationships*. In analysis, both author-participants noted that, for neurodiverse learners, the transition from K–12 schooling to higher education reflected a fundamental shift in responsibility that seemed to contribute to challenges faced in IHE. For example, unlike K–12 settings where multidisciplinary teams possess extensive knowledge of a student's history and needs, post-secondary disability service personnel and faculty members

frequently have limited information and limited support structures available to them. The student is expected to be the expert and primary self-advocate. A compounding complication is that students of the global majority and who are also neurodiverse are expected to do so within systems that are expressly built without them in mind.

When faculty recognize this, they are empowered to act on it in their individual contexts and become advocates who work alongside students to create more equitable, neurodiversity-affirming, culturally-sustaining systems, processes, and supports. This, in turn, can be strengthened through relationships with students, and can become relationally-sustaining practices that enhance student experiences on campus.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The results of this study suggest that there are significant structural and systemic gaps in faculty readiness to support neurodiverse students pursuing higher education. Among the barriers identified are faculty training and ongoing support, clarity of roles and responsibilities of neurodiverse students in institutes of higher education - as well as how they differ from those in K-12 settings - and student transition planning based on that knowledge.

Based on these findings, both authors recommend that faculty across disciplines be provided access to explicit, modeled training in UDL, disability, and inclusive instructional design as part of formal preparation (not simply left to trial-and-error on the job), paired with ongoing, peer-based support (mentoring, communities of practice, consultation) once they are in the field. Faculty preparation would benefit from an intentional focus on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, the adoption of a Dis/Crit perspective to evaluate learning design and implementation, and guided practice with facilitating neurodiversity-affirming student-faculty and student-student interactions. In addition, faculty – both pre- and post- formal training –

would benefit from learning in spaces that model inclusivity and accessibility, encourages risk taking, allows for practice with feedback, and views mistakes as a critical part of the learning process. Similarly, the authors found that neurodiverse college students would benefit from parallel preparation: explicit instruction in self-advocacy, disability literacy, and how to communicate their needs to instructors who may know very little about their history, and/or disability and accessibility. In particular, neurodiverse candidates may benefit from learning strategies for persevering in their self-advocacy, even when conversations become uncomfortable.

Finally, both groups benefit from institutional structures that protect time and create space for the relationship-building that underlies effective, individualized support. Efforts to improve accessibility are most likely to succeed when faculty are supported in building responsive, learner-centered educational environments that include intentional relationship-building strategies and students are recognized as knowledgeable partners in the process.

Table 1

Summary of Recommendations

Priority	Recommended action
Faculty preparation	Embed disability, accessibility, instructional design, UDL, and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies in doctoral, faculty-preparation, and onboarding pathways. Continue learning through case-based professional development, mentoring, and communities of practice.
Institutional capacity	Create durable partnerships among faculty, instructional designers, disability specialists, and teaching-and-learning centers. Make time, consultation, and shared problem-solving visible parts of the work. Utilize evaluation and recognition metrics that prioritize inclusive, accessible, neurodiversity-affirming and culturally-sustaining teaching practices. Evaluate current policies, practices, supports, and data trends - for both students and faculty - through a Dis/Crit lens.
Student transition	Partner with secondary schools, transition programs, and disability-support offices to develop disability literacy, self-determination, self-advocacy, and

Priority	Recommended action
Relational practice	communication skills before college. Further, institutes of higher education could audit the current institutional policies, practices and supports available for neurodiverse students, with a focus on reducing the burden of self-advocacy commonly placed on those students. Support faculty in building trust, inviting student expertise, and using collaborative conversations to identify workable supports while respecting privacy and student agency.

Conclusion

Across these conversations, a shared understanding emerged: the barriers neurodiverse students face in higher education stem largely from institutional and preparatory gaps, not individual malice. Barriers are produced by environments built around narrow assumptions, not by learner deficits.

The interpretive nature of duoethnographic methodology constrains insights and recommendations, as all data was co-constructed and context-bound. However, the findings presented here are supported through transparency, reflexivity, relational accountability, and iterative member reflection rather than through replicability, and although alternative interpretations of the same dialogue remain possible, the findings position accessibility as a shared institutional responsibility, not a task delegated to individual students, instructors, or disability-services offices. Future work might extend this inquiry by pairing additional practitioners with varied training backgrounds, and/or by incorporating the perspectives of neurodivergent students (and faculty) themselves. It should additionally strive toward larger-scale studies of faculty preparation and self-efficacy, of neurodiverse students' transition experiences and self-advocacy preparation, and of the effectiveness of specific interventions such as UDL training, peer-collaboration models between special and general educators, and collaborative accommodation processes.

Moving from accommodation as compliance to access as culture requires proactive course design, sustained faculty learning, better transition preparation, and relationships that make dialogue possible. The aim is not simply to respond to barriers after they arise, but to build learning environments with human variability in mind. Meaningful, lasting change requires shared institutional responsibility: trained faculty, prepared students, and systems built for variability *from the start*.

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When the Body Won't Let the Brain Read: Emotional Self-Regulation in Urban Adolescent Literacy Intervention

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Abstract

Adolescent striving readers in urban schools face emotional and physiological barriers that interrupt comprehension before instruction begins. Grounded in the Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) and Active Self-Regulation as a bridging process, this theoretical synthesis argues that emotional co-regulation functions as a prerequisite for reading comprehension, not a supplement to literacy instruction. Drawing on trauma-informed education, social-emotional learning, and AVR-aligned intervention literature, the paper presents convergent evidence across three themes: adverse childhood experiences systematically disrupt literacy learning conditions; active self-regulation is a high-leverage, under-targeted intervention variable; and embodied regulation practices create essential affective conditions for comprehension. Implications for urban adolescent literacy intervention are discussed. *Keywords:* emotional self-regulation, trauma-informed pedagogy, urban adolescent literacy

Purpose

When the body is in survival mode, the brain cannot read. Adolescent striving readers in urban schools face emotional and physiological barriers rooted in nervous system dysregulation that interrupt reading comprehension before instruction begins. While the Science of Reading has advanced understanding of the cognitive and linguistic processes underlying literacy development, emotional self-regulation remains an under-addressed variable in adolescent

literacy intervention, particularly for students whose learning histories are shaped by trauma, chronic stress, and systemic inequity. This paper argues that emotional self-regulation, situated within the Active Self-Regulation (ASR) construct of the Active View of Reading (AVR; Duke & Cartwright, 2021), functions as a potentially important prerequisite bridging process for many urban adolescent learners. Drawing on trauma-informed education, SEL, and AVR-aligned literature, this paper presents Zizi's Place, a Tier 3 literacy intervention model for grades 5–8, as an illustration of emotional co-regulation as a foundational instructional condition.

Framework

This paper is grounded in the AVR (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), a comprehensive model of skilled reading that extends beyond the Simple View of Reading by incorporating bridging processes and active self-regulation as essential components of reading comprehension. Within the AVR, ASR encompasses the motivational, emotional, and behavioral processes readers deploy to initiate, sustain, and monitor engagement with text, functioning as a gatekeeping construct: when dysregulation is present, access to the cognitive and linguistic processes that drive comprehension is functionally interrupted. This interruption is not metaphorical; dysregulation triggers neurobiological stress responses that redirect cognitive resources away from the prefrontal processes reading comprehension requires, effectively placing the body in direct conflict with the demands of literacy instruction. Burns et al. (2023) provide meta-analytic support for ASR as a high-leverage intervention target, with findings carrying explicit social justice implications for urban learners disproportionately underserved by narrow, skills-only instructional approaches.

Complementing the AVR, trauma-informed education frameworks (Brunzell et al., 2016; Ernest et al., 2022) establish that students with adverse childhood experience histories require

co-regulatory relational conditions before cognitive engagement becomes possible. Fombouchet et al. (2023) ground this neurologically, demonstrating that still-maturing prefrontal systems render adolescents particularly vulnerable to dysregulation under stress. Taken together, these frameworks position emotional co-regulation as the affective precondition within which literacy instruction can take root, operationalized at Zizi's Place through coffeeshop-style seating, nature-inspired design, dim LED lighting, a calming green-and-blue palette, and embedded mindfulness and yoga-informed SEL strategies drawn from the Breathe for Change educator wellness and yoga training framework (Nankin, 2016), in which the interventionist holds certification as both a 200-hour yoga instructor and SEL practitioner. Co-regulation is not ancillary to instruction in this model; it is the instructional foundation.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a theoretical synthesis methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed empirical literature, meta-analytic research, and practitioner-informed conceptual analysis to argue for emotional self-regulation as a potentially important prerequisite bridging process within adolescent literacy intervention. Sources were selected through a purposive review guided by theoretical alignment with the AVR framework, relevance to urban adolescent populations, and recency of publication, with priority given to studies published between 2016 and 2025. Where sources address populations differing from urban U.S. middle school settings, limitations are noted and translation to the target context is addressed explicitly. This synthesis is further informed by the author's practitioner experience as a Tier 3 literacy interventionist and by preparation in yoga, mindfulness, and SEL through the Breathe for Change framework (Nankin, 2016), consistent with practitioner inquiry traditions that position the classroom as a site of knowledge generation and social justice-oriented inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Findings

A synthesis of the literature reveals three convergent themes supporting the central argument.

Theme 1: Adverse Childhood Experiences Systematically Disrupt the Conditions for Literacy Learning

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events occurring before age 18, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, with measurable effects on neurological development, health, and learning outcomes. Qu et al. (2024) found, across a meta-analysis of 20 studies representing over 1.1 million children and adolescents, that one or more ACEs significantly increased the odds of poor academic achievement, with a dose-response relationship between cumulative ACE score and academic outcomes, meaning greater ACE exposure corresponds to progressively greater risk. Urban adolescent populations carry disproportionate ACE exposure, meaning disruption of regulatory capacity is not an individual deficit but a systemic and structural condition. Ernest et al. (2022) document that students with trauma histories require relational safety and co-regulatory conditions as preconditions for cognitive engagement, reframing dysregulation from behavioral problem to physiological adaptation. In this way, the body becomes the first text the interventionist must read. When a student enters the intervention space in a state of hyperarousal or shutdown, the autonomic nervous system has already determined what cognitive resources are available, and Fombouchet et al. (2023) confirm that still-maturing prefrontal systems render adolescents particularly vulnerable to that physiological displacement. Literacy instruction that does not first address that state is, in effect, asking the brain to perform under conditions the body will not permit.

Theme 2: Active Self-Regulation Is a High-Leverage, Under-Targeted Intervention

Variable

Burns et al. (2023) provide the strongest empirical support for ASR as an intervention target, finding that bridging process interventions produced an effect size of 0.70 on reading outcomes for striving readers, with active self-regulation interventions specifically yielding an effect size of 0.46 across 333 studies. Critically, Burns et al. (2023) frame these findings within an explicit social justice argument: striving readers in under-resourced urban settings disproportionately receive narrow, skills-only interventions that bypass the bridging processes most predictive of comprehension gains. Failing to target ASR is not simply a missed instructional opportunity; it is an equity issue.

Theme 3: SEL and Embodied Regulation Practices Create the Affective Conditions for Comprehension

Hua et al. (2025) found that SEL promotes reading achievement through four interrelated pathways: improved emotional regulation, increased intrinsic motivation, strengthened relational conditions, and sustained reading behaviors. Brunzell et al. (2016) extend this into trauma-informed contexts, demonstrating that flexible, regulation-first learning environments produce meaningful gains in regulatory capacity for students with trauma histories. David et al. (2024) add nuance by identifying specific cognitive emotion regulation strategies, including reappraisal and acceptance, that differentiate more and less proficient readers, suggesting explicit instruction in regulation strategies may itself constitute a form of literacy intervention.

Scholarly Significance

This paper makes three interconnected contributions to urban literacy education, trauma-informed practice, and reading intervention research. First, it advances a theoretical reframing of

ASR as a gatekeeping construct with prerequisite status, shifting instructional responsibility from student compliance to environmental and relational design. Second, it contributes Zizi's Place as a practitioner-generated, theoretically grounded model proposing that trauma-informed environmental design, embodied regulation practices, and SEL-aligned relational routines may be integrated into structured literacy intervention without displacing evidence-based reading instruction, addressing a persistent false binary between Science of Reading frameworks and whole-child approaches. Third, it positions the practitioner-researcher as a resilience architect in urban education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), with the Breathe for Change framework (Nankin, 2016) as a potentially transferable preparation pathway for intervention specialists.

Limitations and Future Directions

This paper presents a theoretical synthesis informed by existing research and practitioner experience rather than an empirical evaluation of an intervention. The conclusions reflect interpretations of published scholarship and should not be understood as direct evidence of the effectiveness of Zizi's Place. The studies reviewed vary in population, educational context, and research design, and the proposed application to urban adolescent literacy intervention has not been systematically evaluated. Future research should examine the feasibility and implementation of the model and investigate potential relationships between regulation-centered instructional practices, student engagement, and measurable literacy outcomes.

Implementation Framework

The three themes converge into three actionable principles for urban literacy intervention specialists: (1) assess regulatory state before academic demand, using environmental design, relational check-ins, and co-regulatory routines as instructional prerequisites rather than warm-up activities; (2) target ASR explicitly within the intervention arc by embedding mindfulness,

breath-based, and movement practices as potentially teachable literacy skills rather than behavioral interventions; and (3) integrate SEL as structural scaffolding through relationship-first routines, choice, and affective safety to create the sustained engagement conditions within which comprehension instruction can take root.

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Moving From Mentoring to Jegnaship: Reconceptualizing How We Engage Black Women in the Academy

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Abstract

Traditional models of mentoring doctoral students are grounded in mainstream student experiences. Through critical self-inquiry, this paper argues for the significance of Jegnas, the necessity of covenants, and the power of being in-community as essential to the holistic success of Black women in doctoral programs. Moving beyond traditional mentoring practices shaped by white and masculine norms, this inquiry reveals the need for a more holistic, culturally rooted, and spiritually grounded approach that honors the fullness of who we are as Jegnas and jegnees.

Keywords: Mentoring, Black women, Doctoral education

Introduction

This project began as a critical self-reflection of KJ's mentoring practices, guided by the question, "How can I be a more effective mentor?" As KJ conducted an autoethnographic study of thirty years of teaching and mentoring, Diane retired from law enforcement and entered her doctoral journey. Together, their experiences illuminated the central importance of community

and the transformative role that being in-community plays in developing Black women scholars.

This inquiry was guided by three questions:

1. In what ways does a Jegna operate differently from the traditional notion of a mentor?
2. What is the significance of being in-community for Jegnas and our students or jegnees?
3. In what ways does being in-community serve to create healthy, safe spaces for Black women?

Methodology

KJ conducted her critical self-reflection using almost 30 years of journaling about her experiences mentoring doctoral students; evaluations from conducting Research BootCamps and writing retreats at various institutions from 2003-2025. In May, 2026 after Diane started graduate school, we were discussing these experiences, and the topic of mentoring came up. In summer 2026, we curated face-to-face opportunities to work collaboratively on this project and other shared research interests. Our co-writing began when KJ shared the paper evolving from the autoethnography. The original paper was exchanged using email; the comment sections and tracked changes were used to evolve our writing together. Whenever we exchanged iterations of our work, lengthy conversations followed to clarify and evolve this shared product.

Establishing a Covenant in the Academy

Serving as a Jegna (KJ)

Community is at the center of the work that a Jegna does. In Summer 2025, I served as a Jegna for the Sankofa Research Intensive (SRI). Jegna is an ancient Ethiopian term describing “a very brave person who is a protector of a culture, the rights of his or her people and their land” (Lazarus360, 2008). A Jegna synthesizes wisdom from lifelong experiences and shapes it into a

legacy for future generations (Association of Black Psychologists, 2025). Translated into English, Jegna signifies hero, warrior, courage, strength, and cultural protection. It is a title earned through struggle, demonstrated fearlessness, and unwavering commitment to nurturing and advancing one's people. This definition evokes the grandmothers, mothers, and aunties who preserve legacy through storytelling and shared presence, embodying what it truly means to be in-community.

I have designed and implemented research-intensive workshops for doctoral students and junior faculty for more than 20 years, but the transition to online instruction in response to the global pandemic makes work more isolating. Although I supervise dissertation research for more than 10 students on average every semester and actively mentor doctoral students and junior faculty at other institutions, there's been an element of intellectual isolation that makes mentoring more exhausting. Being a mentor, in the traditional sense of the word, is not a sustainable model, especially if you attract a lot of doctoral students. It was at the SRI that I recognized the sustainability of serving as a Jegna, because of the role of the covenant and power of being in-community. Changing the model that guides my work with students has made me more effective overall.

The Making of a Doctoral Student (Diane)

After thirty-six years of marriage, raising three children, serving thirty-one years as a federal employee, including twenty-one years as a police officer, surviving breast cancer, and ministering as a licensed evangelist for more than two decades, I reached a season of life where I felt called to continue growing. Following my retirement in 2025, I enrolled in a doctoral program in 2026. Rather than viewing retirement as a time to slow down, I saw it as an opportunity to fulfill a long-held dream.

My decision to pursue a doctorate is rooted in the legacy of two remarkable women: my mother-in-law, Sally Reese King (October 11, 1919 – July 28, 2016), and my mother, Eula Dee Irvin Martin (October 12, 1928 – July 24, 2016). They passed away days apart from each other. Despite living during a time when racism, discrimination, and limited opportunities constrained Black women, they demonstrated resilience, wisdom, and faith. Their experiences reflect the reality that Black women have often carried significant responsibilities while receiving little recognition for their contributions (Porcher & Austin, 2021). Their sacrifices inspired me to pursue opportunities they were denied and to honor the foundation they built for future generations.

Their lives taught me the value of education, perseverance, and faith. Evans (2021) suggested that Black women's stories serve as powerful testimonies of healing and resilience. In many ways, the stories of my mother and mother-in-law continue to guide my understanding of purpose and determination.

My research interest in Black women leaders and spirituality emerges from my own experiences. Throughout my career, ministry, personal challenges, and triumphs, faith has been my anchor. As I reflected on my journey and discussed my academic interests with KJ, I realized that studying the relationship between leadership and spirituality among Black women was also a way of exploring my own lived experiences. Eagle Shield et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of dreaming, healing, and listening as transformative practices that foster growth and human flourishing, concepts that resonate deeply with my understanding of spirituality.

As I continue this doctoral journey, I recognize the importance of mentors who possess not only scholarly expertise but also integrity, compassion, and a willingness to listen. I value mentors, like KJ, who create space for reflection, challenge my thinking, and support both my

personal and academic development. Such relationships are especially important for Black women navigating spaces where their voices and contributions have not always been fully recognized (Porcher & Austin, 2021).

Ultimately, I view this doctoral journey as more than an academic endeavor. It is an opportunity to honor the women who came before me, deepen my understanding of faith and leadership, and contribute knowledge that may benefit future generations. Through this work, I hope to explore how Black women leaders draw upon spirituality as a source of resilience, purpose, and transformation.

The Role of the Covenant

In the church, the covenant functions as a sacred framework that shapes relationships, responsibilities, and spiritual identity. In Genesis 17:7, God establishes covenant as an enduring promise of guidance, faithfulness, and mutual commitment. He declares, “I will establish my covenant... to be a God unto thee” (Genesis 17:7, King James Version [KJV], 1769/2024), reminding believers that covenant is both relational and transformative. Within community, covenants are spaces of trust, accountability, and shared purpose. They call individuals to walk in integrity, honor commitments, and support one another's growth. The covenant is also reflected in the biblical responsibility of intergenerational teaching and mentoring. In Titus 2:3-5, older women are instructed to model godly character and to teach younger women wisdom and virtue. Scripture states that “the aged women likewise... may teach the young women” (Titus 2:3-4, KJV, 1769/2024). There is covenantal responsibility of experienced women to nurture, guide, and encourage the next generation through their knowledge, faith, and lived experiences. Such mentoring relationships strengthen both individuals and communities by passing down wisdom, values, and spiritual understanding.

In academic and leadership contexts, these covenantal relationships foster resilience, create opportunities for authentic growth, and provide safe spaces for reflection and development. Our relationship reflects this biblical principle, as our conversations have become a space for mutual encouragement, learning, and discernment. Ultimately, the covenant anchors believers in God's unwavering presence while shaping how they show up for others through service, mentorship, and love.

Being “In Covenant” versus “In Community”

In higher education, our academic disciplines often shape the communities we form. When Black women exist at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), we oftentimes experience them as hostile and marginalizing. This is a common experience when we find ourselves “in a community,” which we define as an unintentionally curated space resulting from the circumstances of our employment or enrollment. As Black women navigating predominantly white or masculine spaces, we find one another at PWIs through shared experience and mutual recognition. It is within this context that organizations such as Sisters of the Academy Institute (SOTA) and the Sankofa Research Intensive (SRI) network emerged. Without a shared covenant, the possibility of being in-community would not exist. A covenant is a sacred, intentional agreement rooted in shared values, accountability, and collective purpose. Unlike a contract, it is relational, affirms belonging, upholds dignity, and has shared responsibility. For Black women in these academic spaces, covenants serve as spiritual and communal anchors, creating conditions for trust, safety, and truth-telling that allow us to thrive in the most heinous circumstances. Organizations like SOTA and SRI cultivate spaces where Black women are fully seen, supported, and strengthened. Concentric to the curation of these intentional spaces at SRI is the role of Jengnas.

Jegnas Re-conceptualize and Reshape Mentoring Spaces

It was through our familial and caring relationship that the aspects of mentorship aligned with the vision I have for myself as a *Jegna*. From my homeplace at an HBCU, I mentor Black scholars across the country who are pursuing doctoral degrees at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) or minoritized faculty navigating the tenure and promotion culture. These experiences have reinforced my belief that mentorship is more than academic guidance; it is about building confidence, fostering community, and helping students thrive as scholars and leaders.

As we distilled long conversations and co-writing down to manageable lessons to share with those doing mentoring work.

Lesson 1: The nature of the mentoring relationship should be honest, encouraging, affirming, and reassuring. We both show up as our authentic selves.

KJ: “Know thyself” is a principle that shapes how I approach mentorship. I consider myself a self-described “hood intellectual,” born and raised in Gary, Indiana, a city often defined by challenge rather than opportunity. Today, I have found my academic home at an HBCU, where my experiences and values align with the mission of serving Black students. As a first-generation doctoral student, I understand the unique obstacles, doubts, and responsibilities that often accompany this journey. For that reason, I am especially committed to mentoring first-generation Black doctoral students. I see my role not only as sharing knowledge but also as providing encouragement, affirmation, and practical guidance.

Diane: “Know thyself” is the principle that shapes my journey as a doctoral student. I was born and raised in an agricultural community in Tylertown, Mississippi, where Black farmers owned and worked their land, instilling values of faith, hard work, and perseverance. I identify as

a Christian who seeks God's divine guidance for both personal and spiritual growth. As I pursue this doctoral journey, I strive to reach my goals with courage and confidence, trusting God's direction while embracing opportunities to learn and develop. I find encouragement and am reassured by mentors. I look for guidance to help me navigate the challenges and uncertainties of doctoral study with greater purpose and determination.

Lesson 2: The Jegna-jegnee relationship should be rooted in a larger village community that nurtures professional development and one's spirit.

KJ: For me, effective mentorship is not measured by the number of students I mentor but by the quality of the relationships we build. Equally important are the relationships students develop with one another, which help create a sense of community and belonging. As I mentor individuals, they, in turn, share their knowledge, experiences, and growth with the larger group. This collaborative exchange fosters an environment of mutual support, accountability, and learning. To cultivate this sense of community, I host virtual writing retreats and facilitate collaborative research teams that encourage meaningful connections, scholarly engagement, and collective success. Through these intentional spaces, students are empowered to grow both academically and personally while contributing to the strength and sustainability of the community.

Diane: Opportunities to attend the Dissertation Boot Camp and Research Symposium strengthened my commitment to this doctoral journey. There, my relationship with KJ evolved from familial to mentoring and back again. Through the sessions about research, I was able to fellowship with other doctoral students. I realized I was not alone in my fears, struggles, and uncertainties. Being in a virtual program can be isolating, but mentoring provides access to opportunities to be in-community with students who have similar goals.

Lesson 3: Offset the isolation associated with the doctoral journey and focus on building independence.

KJ: With each student meeting, I strive to shift the dynamic from “me telling” to “us talking.” As a *Jegna*, I seek to balance fostering students' independence with maintaining high expectations that reflect a broader vision of excellence. My goal is not simply to guide students academically but to empower them to think critically, develop confidence, and take ownership of their growth as scholars and leaders.

Diane: One of the most difficult challenges I faced when entering the doctoral program was the fear of isolation. As an online student, I often feel disconnected without the face-to-face interactions that foster support and encouragement. The Community Building Events hosted by Grand Canyon University on Zoom became a source of guidance and reassurance. They served as a beacon of light through periods of uncertainty, helping me navigate the fog of doctoral study. These gatherings provided opportunities to connect with others who shared similar challenges and aspirations, reminding me that I was not alone in the journey. Through these experiences, bridges were built across the gaps of distance and isolation, creating a sense of community, support, and direction that strengthened my confidence and persistence.

Lesson 4: The relationship requires regularity.

KJ: In order to establish a relationship with my students, I schedule regular appointments. Early in my career, meetings with doctoral students were triggered by the submission of a recent draft of their work or they needed me to answer a question. By establishing regular meetings, particularly those students least confident in conducting research, I am able to dismantle feelings of inferiority and angst associated with navigating the research process. During these regular meetings, I find that the discussion is not just about research, but the way their lives impact their

productivity. Or students want me to share my lived experiences as a model for structuring their own journey. As we sometimes say, life be lifing’.

Diane: Not having regular opportunities to sit down with a mentor or instructor is isolating. While the online format had both advantages and disadvantages, it taught me resilience, self-discipline, and the importance of intentionally seeking community and support throughout my doctoral journey.

Lesson 5: The need to leverage technology to facilitate communication and students’ professional development.

KJ: Healthy relationships reduce anxiety and are safe spaces where everyone shows up fully. Embracing this aspect of my Jegnaship means that I evolve by embracing new technologies, new methodologies, new ideas; my life-long learning benefits my students. For years, I scribbled feedback on hard copies of my students’ work. When we transitioned to virtual instruction, I simply used my iPad and an Apple Pen to recreate the same scenario in virtual space. Every student I had joked about the need to learn to decipher my handwriting and the angst it caused them.

I now utilize a combination of video recordings and transcriptions to support students as they revise and develop their work. All artifacts are uploaded to a shared drive using Cloud technology. And we both review the previous notes as we prepare for future meetings. While these strategies reduce my students’ anxiety, it does not alleviate their stress completely.

Diane: While learning new technologies can sometimes feel slow and overwhelming, it makes me more productive. From visual learning tools to innovative support systems, technology helps me navigate my classwork and research with greater confidence. These tools help with

writing, grammar, APA formatting, the identification of sources for my research, opportunities for conferences and more.

Conclusion

In the systematic examination of KJ's mentoring experiences, we discovered the following: 1) communities that operate around a **shared covenant** thrive; 2) concentric to the establishment of a shared covenant in an academic space is the ability to be **in-community**; 3) sustaining a covenant requires the **evolution of healthy spaces** that reaffirm who people are, values them, and is committed to their success as an individual and a collective. Jegnas should focus on building reflexive practices that address the challenges that students experience when 'life is lifing' while dissertating. And although this inquiry focused primarily on mentoring Black women doctoral students at PWIs, KJ employs this framework in her work with doctoral students at an HBCU. Certainly, the proliferation of traditional models of mentoring do little to address poor doctoral completion rates. Maybe it's time for a more relational and communal approach.

Goals and Implications

So many of the challenges that exist in higher education are the result of environments, climates, or circumstances that frustrate student success. In the case of doctoral education, program completion rates have long been abysmal, spawning jokes about what it means to be ABD. The nature of the relationships that we establish with doctoral students has the potential to increase their likelihood of degree completion while also increasing their professional effectiveness. Doing so requires the evolution of our relationships with our doctoral students. Instead of those few prized graduate students who enjoyed stellar relationships with their dissertation chairs (like me), recentering our focus on our students would require relationship

building. It is that relationship that has the capacity to influence the students' likelihood of program completion even through tribulations.

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Shifting Paradigms on Diversity: The Impact of Anti-DEI Policies on K–12 Educators’ Professional Practice

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Abstract

This multi-phase, mixed methods study explores the impact of anti-DEI policies on educators’ professional practice. Relying on the data from a qualitative content analysis (QCA) of existing anti-DEI policies, researchers’ journals, and an Educators’ survey, we identified the following patterns: 1) policy goals target the removal of policies, programs, and practices that expand access and opportunity for groups historically marginalized; 2) school climates are hostile to discussions about diversity for educators who continue to embrace CRSL and CRT; and, 3) educators describe strategies to resist unlawful policies.

Keywords: Educational Policy, Anti-DEI Policies, Mixed Methods Research

This study explores anti-DEI policies in schools, their role in promoting structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1990; Wilson, 2021), and educators’ strategies for maintaining culturally responsive teaching and leadership in this political climate. The first phase of this exploratory mixed methods study was a qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Schreier, 2013). In

the second phase, we developed perceptual surveys to examine educators' (teachers/faculty/administrators) and other professionals' perceived impact of anti-DEI policies on their professional practice. This paper includes our results from the QCA, researchers' journals, and a subset of the Educators' Survey. Because of the evolving shift in DEI policies, we continue to find new policies, lawsuits, and articles to include in the Document Collection for this study.

Positionality Statement

Members of the research team work in, or have worked in, settings directly affected by the federal, state, and institutional policies examined in this study. This insider perspective helped us recognize how anti-DEI policies shape daily professional practice. The research team includes six members of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, Policy & Law at Alabama State University: one faculty principal investigator, Dr. KJ, and five Ph.D. students. We have more than 60 years of combined teaching and professional experience across K-12 schools, higher education, and the public sector. Collectively, we identify as Black people; two of our team members identify as bi-racial, and the one Black male on our team is originally from Togo, a West African country invaded by Germany until 1918 and by France since. The team worked together on every phase of the project, including document collection and review, qualitative coding and analysis, survey data organization, source and citation verification, and manuscript development.

Conceptualizations & Theory(ies)

Our research draws on critical theories that view education as a mechanism for perpetuating racialized violence. Galtung (1990) described violence as preventable harm to basic human needs, lowering satisfaction below what is possible. In the U.S., schools inflict violence

on Black communities. Love (2016) described education as systemic, institutionalized, anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence that murders the spirits of Black kids. Structural and cultural violence benefit people raced as white. Wilson (2021) argued that maintaining white organizations produces material and symbolic effects, with historical discrimination aligning resources and power in favor of white individuals. Recent anti-DEI policies aim to undo legal protections against racism and reinforce resource hoarding among white males. Siegel (1997) calls this "transformation through preservation." In particular, while policies change based on political will, changing social contexts, or legal challenges, the new system is designed to preserve the same race-based privileges that existed before.

Phase I – Understanding the Policy Goals

The overarching question guiding our research: What are contemporary conservative policy goals and how do these shifts impact professional practice? We examine two sub-questions for this paper: 1) What are contemporary conservative policy goals regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion?; and, 2) What are educators' perceptions of the impact of anti-DEI policies on the work they do?

Research Design

Schreier (2013) identified eight steps in conducting a qualitative content analysis: Step 1. deciding on a research question; Step 2. selecting material; Step 3. building a coding frame; Step 4. segmentation; Step 5. trial coding; Step 6. evaluating and modifying the coding frame; Step 7. main analysis; and, Step 8. presenting and interpreting the findings. (p. 7).

Selecting materials

The Document Collection for this study currently consists of 182 sources: 5 Executive Orders, 112 periodicals and other federal communications targeting DEI policies, 49 state

legislative documents, 3 research articles for the study's theoretical framework, and the Heritage Foundation’s *Project 2025* (2023). We also relied on reflective journaling and a subset of the data we collected using the Educators’ Survey. Coding focused on diversity-related concepts such as race, gender, sexual orientation, critical race theory, and others.

The Educator’s Survey

The survey (20-30 minutes to complete) was organized into three sections and consisted of 13 questions: 10 demographic questions (e.g., background, race/ethnicity, profession and other education); two open-ended questions inviting participants to describe the impact of anti-DEI policies on their work during the 2024-2025 academic year; and, 1 Likert-type question rated on a 3-point scale, 1 (Not True) to 3 (True), asking participants to describe their feelings about anti-DEI policies. The survey was deployed in May, 2024 and currently has approximately 83 respondents.

Building a coding framework

The following codes were used during the first cycle of coding that included the Document Collection, researchers’ journals, and the surveys. (*See Table 1*).

Table 1

Code System

Research Questions	First Cycle Auto-Codes	First Cycle Codes-Refined
• What are contemporary conservative policy goals regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion or DEI?	Race; sexual orientation and gender identity; critical race theory; gender ideology; immigrant/ immigration; divisive concepts; military; disability; preferences; diversity, equity and inclusion; religion/faith	• Key Buzz Words and Phrases • Conservative anti-DEI Argument • Infrastructure for anti-DEI

Research Questions	First Cycle Auto-Codes	First Cycle Codes-Refined
2) What are educators' perceptions of the impact of anti-DEI policies on the work they do?	Impact on Teaching; Impact on Research; Impact on Administration/Organization	• Impact of anti-DEI policies • Successful Strategies in this anti-DEI era • In Defense of DEI Programs and Goals

Data Analysis

The quickly evolving nature of this current policy climate means that curating and analyzing this Document Collection was challenging. For this paper, we share our analysis of the three most frequently used themes at this phase of the data analysis process: 1) Conservative anti-DEI Argument; 2) Impact of anti-DEI Policies; and 3) Successful Strategies in this anti-DEI Era. These convergent themes were prominent across the Document Collection.

Conservative anti-DEI Argument

The Heritage Foundation's (2023) Project 2025 introduced the language that is reproduced across all federal and state level anti-DEI legislation. Essentially, the conservative policy-making goal is to reverse Constitutional Amendments that increased access and opportunity. Finding a home for the narrative of 'reverse discrimination', affirmative action and DEI are consistently identified in federal and state legislative discourse as practices that give opportunities to 'undeserving Black people' effectively undermining meritocracy. However, unlike the Eugenics movement that attempted to create a science to justify their assertions, the attack on the integrity of science and anti-intellectualism masks the reproduction of more overt discourse and efforts to erase Black contributions and innovations. Alongside the notion of Black inferiority is the criminalization of immigrants and 'sexual orientation and gender identity' or SOGI (Heritage Foundation, 2023). Moreover, with the Supreme Court's reversal of Roe v.

Wade (1973) in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), the goals to marginalize women's rights are a part of the anti-DEI agenda.

Impact of Anti-DEI Policies

Concepts like race, class, sexual orientation, and gender are considered noxious tenets along with “critical race theory” and “sexual orientation-gender ideology or SOGI”. In fact, both the Heritage Foundation (2023) and the states’ legislation prohibited the use of so-called *divisive concepts* in public discourse, eliminated federal and state support for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and programs, and ultimately shuttered programs designed to reduce racism and discrimination across public education. Across the legislation, the notion that DEI required people to take an ‘oath’ that violated their first amendment rights or make statements that were unconstitutional was part of the narrative justifying the passage of the legislation. All training associated with DEI was prohibited unless it specifically violated institutional accreditation standards.

Anti-DEI policies have impacted the academic curricula in K-12 and higher education. All academic programs, grant initiatives, and administrative activities perceived to be aligned with *divisive concepts* have already been, or are being eliminated (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). University donors have been asked to remove race as a criteria for scholarships (Alonso, 2026; Sandweiss, 2025), and faculty rushed to reword syllabi, the language for existing federal and state grants while restructuring grant applications. The number of lawsuits resulting from anti-DEI initiatives grows and signals the involvement of professional associations, teachers’ unions and other advocacy groups. Calls for students, particularly Black athletic recruits, to reject scholarship offers from universities embracing anti-DEI policies have grown (Sullivan, 2024), with some sign that HBCUs and other MSIs may see enrollment

growths. Meanwhile, two recent shootings by immigration officers may signal greater challenges for school leaders in urban schools; they have become the first line responders in the resistance against state sanctioned violence against Black and immigrant children in our public schools.

Successful Strategies in this anti-DEI Era

The autonomy of colleges and universities has long been legally established (Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward, 1819; Sweezy v. New Hampshire, 1957; Keyishian v. Board of Regents, 1967; Regents of the University of Michigan v. Ewing, 1985). Although anti-DEI legislation clearly challenges our autonomy, administrative leaders were able to re-brand activities previously considered DEI as student or community engagement or combined them with student success initiatives. In the classroom, educators have learned to adopt more student-centered teaching strategies in order to support the types of conversations necessary to reduce divisiveness in the future.

Conclusions

Contemporary conservative policy goals have a wide-spread impact on educational climates, administrative, and educators' practice. While our project is on-going, we continue to expand our Document Collection, while adjusting the ways we examine this volatile policy climate. At this stage of our research, we have established the following: 1) policy goals target the removal of policies, programs, academic curricula and practices that expand access and opportunity for groups historically marginalized with a particular disdain for anti-harassment training; 2) school climates are hostile to discussions about diversity for educators who continue to embrace anything related to critical race theory; and, 3) educators describe strategies to resist unlawful policies. While the focus is to dismantle structures that increase access and opportunity

for populations historically targeted by racism and other forms of discrimination, the outcome is that there are fewer structures in place to redress discriminatory practices at the institutional and individual levels. But an examination of educators' practice suggests that resistance and resilience have evolved into a form of professional practice that allows educators to center Black and other diverse students' voices and experiences.

Significance of your work as it relates to the conference theme and selected strand.

While proponents of DEI lament the dismantling of the diversity bureaucracy, what is clearly evident is that these initiatives were ineffective at identifying and addressing structural inequities. Diversity, equity, and inclusion devolved into programmatic efforts to provide support to various diverse groups while leaving intact the very structures that reproduce racial harm and violence. This climate is an opportunity for educators to reimagine an education system that does not reproduce privilege; an educational system that values students' potential at every level. So, this conservative political climate, requires educators to uphold culturally responsive teaching and leadership practices in the face of political challenges by emphasizing resistance to unlawful policies and amplifying all students' experiences.

Limitations

The quickly evolving nature of the current policy climate coupled with the large number of policy documents generated creates a challenge. While we employ MAXQDA to facilitate data analysis, we use multiple strategies for data collection, and our research team works systematically to consistently identify legislation, articles, and lawsuits relevant to our topic, this creates an on-going challenge for this study. The work reflected in this paper reflects sources identified up to September 30, 2026.

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From Anti-Literacy Laws to Zero Tolerance Policies: Educational Violence Against Black Children

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Abstract

This study examines how educational policies have functioned as mechanisms of educational violence against Black children from chattel slavery to the present. It argues that educational violence, defined as the systematic use of policy to regulate, suppress, and harm Black children's intellectual and social development, is embedded within federal, state, and local policy frameworks. Using a critical, historically grounded analysis, this study traces how these policies evolve while maintaining their underlying function of racialized violence. By situating policy as a continuous site of harm rather than failure, this research reframes educational inequity as structural, offering a deeper understanding of how systemic oppression persists in schooling causing educational violence.

Keywords: Educational Violence, Racialized, Triangle of Violence, Black

Purpose

Educational Violence refers to the policies and structurally harmful systems that cause psychological, physical, and epistemological harm to Black children. The purpose of my critical policy analysis is to examine how the American educational system and structural policies have historically functioned as mechanisms of educational violence against Black people. Drawing from educational policy, history, and critical race theory, my study traces the evolution of policies from anti-literacy laws to contemporary disciplinary policies that continue to

marginalize Black students and reproduce structural inequities. The examination is organized across four key domains: Anti-literacy and criminalization of Black intellect, segregation and structural inequity, desegregation and policy transformation, discipline and school policing.

When we pull back the layers of key policies that created the trajectory of education, we can see how an oppressive educational system has been able to sustain for hundreds of years enacting harm on Black bodies and Black intellect. This study conceptualizes that harm by the transformation of legislation.

Framework

This study is grounded in Johan Galtung's (1990) framework of the triangle of violence (TOV) that encompasses: direct, structural, and cultural to examine educational violence as a systemic process within American schooling. Guided by a critical epistemological lens, this research analyzes how policies evolve to do what Siegel (1997) describes as "preservation through transformation," while continuing to reproduce epistemological harm against Black children. In present day we see the preserving of white supremacy in education through documents like Project 2025. Structural violence is being redistributed through Burke (2025) claims that "Federal education policy should be limited and, ultimately, the federal Department of Education should be eliminated. When power is exercised, it should empower students and families, not government". This statement may seem radical and empowering, but the historical nature and undertones set the stage for federal protections of education to be dismantled when they were created to protect and ensure some type of equal access to a decent education for Black people. Paulson and Tikly (2022) reconceptualize Galtung's TOV framework to extend through education; the authors assert "education as an institution is deeply implicated in the environmental domain. The perpetuation of environmentally damaging practices and policies

linked to education such as unsustainable food consumption, heating and travel along with education's role in legitimizing the existing status quo with regards to the environmental domain ensures that education systems are often complicit in reproducing environmental regimes of inequality" (p. 7). I am extending their framework to include creating an environment of violence through the surveillance of Black children in educational settings. Education filters through the triangle of violence framework, Paulson and Tikly (2022) expanded Galtung (1990) definition of cultural violence to include environmental, arguing "cultural violence can also be understood in terms of complex systems although in this case, the focus is on complex discursive systems of signification and meaning to operate across societal domains" (p.8), the public education system operates as this complex violent system because it is in direct conflict with the community nature of Black people and our liberation.

Research Methodology

This paper leverages critical policy analysis for the methodology and qualitative content analysis (QCA). "QCA is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material" (Schreier, 2012, p.12). The document collection is inclusive of policy and legislative documents, lawsuits, executive orders, and scholarly articles that support the triangle of violence framework. Peer reviewed scholarship framed my analysis of policy transformation to trace the violence within education. To develop the analysis of materials and construct analytical categories around the themes among the document sources, I used the Maxqda platform to complete a QCA using the coding of the domains within the triangle of violence: structural, cultural, direct, and the extension of environmental. This allowed me to track the language across documents to attempt to answer the critical research questions; How have historical educational policies enacted structural, cultural, direct, and environmental violence against Black children?

and How do contemporary policies continue to transform educational violence against Black children?

The synthesis of these sources contributes to the development of deductive analytical categories based on the four domains of the framework; (1) structural violence which began with criminalizing Black intellect through legislation, (2) cultural violence through creating improvised Black schools and spaces through the abolishment of reconstruction, (3) direct violence through the school integration process putting Black bodies of children on the line, and (4) environmental violence through school policing and zero tolerance disciplinary policies.

Findings

Structural Violence: Criminalizing Black Intellect through Legislation

The initial structural violent act was through anti-literacy laws that were enacted among slave states to counter slave revolts that were happening in the Caribbean and across the South. Analysis of anti-literacy legislation revealed a recurring pattern in which educational access was controlled, regulated, and denied. These policies were coded as structural violence because legal structures restricted Black literacy, communication, and intellectual development. The historian “Henry W. Farman, reported, “a good many states thought to protect themselves against rebellion and conspiracy by keeping Negroes in ignorance” (Tolley, 2016). Anti-literacy legislation became more prominent after word spread of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) (Dubois, 2004). Tolley (2016) explains “the laws against reading reinforced the suppression of communication among slaves and between slaves from access to anti-slavery literature”. Policies were legislated one after the other from initial literacy legislative to Plessy v. Ferguson making the law of the land “separate but equal” that affected access for newly emancipated Black people to obtain new knowledge.

Cultural Violence: Creating Improvised Black Schools and Learning Spaces

Peer reviewed scholarship of Staples (2016) and analysis of Plessey v. Ferguson (1896) provide support for the cultural violence that has occurred. Congress created the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865. This legislation was on face value designed to support newly emancipated Black people; however, it became another mechanism to enact cultural violence through enforcing the desires white supremacy by developing Black schools and neighborhoods. These documents and lawsuits were coded cultural violence because they were a critical analysis of the laws and policies enacting violence by creating underfunded Black schools. Pierce examines the reality of the Bureau asserting "the original freedmen's bureau act made no provision for negro education. Consequently, during the first year, the educational operations of the bureau were relatively unimportant" (as cited in Staples, 2016, p.42). Educating Black people was not seen as a priority, however the persistence of the Black communities used the law to their advantage to create their educational spaces. Brown (2025) points out "freedmen's generation, those who experienced slavery and freedom, organized and agitated for public education, not just for themselves but for everyone. Their activism resulted in establishment of public education for both Black and white children in the South" (p.30). Even though education became provided, the lack of funding for Black schools created a culture of poverty for Black learning spaces. School districts across the south refused to invest equitably in Black schools by the "1880's in Georgia white students barely had quality education but still had access to schools in rural area at 4,517 compared to just 2,020 for Black students" (Brown, 2025, p.26).

Direct Violence: School Integration

These findings demonstrate the transition from structural violence embedded in segregated schooling to direct violence when Black children were placed in white spaces. Brown

v. Board (1954) along with the subsequent lawsuits that followed and the uprising of white resistance executive orders address the direct violence school integration caused Black children. “The plaintiffs contend that segregated public schools are not "equal" and cannot be made "equal," and that hence they are deprived of the equal protection of the laws” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Southern states signed on to what was called the “Southern Manifesto” an agreement to resist the implementation of *Brown* (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 2025). What came out of the agreement was “Massive Resistance” which was a collection of legal frameworks that aggressively pushed against integration; such as “punishing any public school that integrated by eliminating its state funding and eventually closing the school” (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 2025). Northern states effectively resisted against this ruling through neighborhood red lining and not providing busing for Black students to integrate white schools. Jackson (2024) speaks to the political outrage of white southerners, “the White South quickly declared that desegregation posed a threat to the “southern way of life” and vowed to block any attempts at racial intermingling through policies of “massive resistance” (p.72). This came in the form of angry white mobs attacking Black children, threats against families, and school closures.

Environmental Violence: School Policing and Zero Tolerance Policies

One of the most significant pieces of legislation that support creating environmental violence is Zero Tolerance Policies (2018) which “created minimum requirements for disciplinary actions to student misbehaviors, often without any consideration of the unique circumstances of the incident or whether punishment matches the behavior” (Aldridge, p.2). these policies were only an extension within education from “*Guns Free Schools Act of 1994*; which required that K-12 schools funded under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act must immediately expel any students found in possession of a gun within 1,000

feet of the school campus” (McNeal, 2016; Aldridge, 2018). Since controlling the improvised environment that surrounds the school seemed impossible to law makers, they realized controlling the students inside of school buildings was more efficient. Doing so enacted school violence against Black children criminalizing childish behavior. The educational system went on to adapt the Zero Tolerance policies to address student behavior, which disproportionately led to increased referrals and suspensions of Black children even in cases where no weapons were involved.

Limitations

Limitations within the study are based on documents that cannot account for individual lived experiences. Historical records reflect perspectives for their time periods but are unable to speak to the evolution of practices that preceded a particular period. The policies and lawsuits chosen cannot represent every state or local educational policy that affected or affects Black children. Another limitation is through the limited coding because it is based on predefined categories that did not allow for extra coding guidelines. The extension of the environmental violence framework requires additional empirical study for full application.

Implications for Urban Education

Contemporary policies that govern disciplinary systems need to be evaluated for intention and historical continuity for the harm caused Black children especially in urban areas. Urban educational leaders should examine the use and implementation of oppressive systems and policies that reinforce direct violence on Black children. Policies that regulate curriculum development need to examine how educational access functions as another form of epistemological harm. Future research should focus on empirical research that examines

students, educators, communities, and policymakers' experience with the historical harm identified throughout my analysis.

Scholarly Significance

Research positions education as a great equalizer. In doing so, conversations about the racialized violence reproduced by schools are rarely interrogated, because it challenges educators and policy makers to not only reconsider but make drastic changes to an educational system that has proven harmful to Black children. This paper elucidates the complexities of how violence is enacted through education in every facet and attempts to address the critical questions of; What marks have systems of historical educational violence left on institutions, communities, and children? and What marks do contemporary policies continue to inscribe educational violence against Black children? Love (2019) presents the evidence of what marks have been left historically on education and Black children within school buildings through her theory of “spirit murdering”. “Spirit murdering within a school context is the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism (Love, 2019)”. This scholarship is applying an extension of Galtung’s violence framework to trace educational policies across historical periods to understand the consistent harmed caused and that is still being perpetuated on Black children.

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Interpreting Generative AI Policy: Humanities Faculty Responses to Institutional Communication

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Abstract

Faculty in humanities disciplines are on the front line of GenAI-related academic integrity enforcement, yet they are among the least likely to have had input into the policies they must apply. Little is known about how the communication of those policies shapes faculty interpretation. This paper presents the design and literature-based rationale for a three-phase mixed-methods study, currently in progress, that examines how humanities faculty interpret and enact GenAI-related academic integrity policies based on how those policies reach them. Framing theory and sensemaking theory together provide the conceptual basis. Sampling spans urban-serving institutions, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions, where differences in implementation capacity and exposure to detection-tool bias may distribute the costs of unclear communication unevenly. No empirical findings are reported; the paper offers literature-based propositions that the study will examine. *Keywords:* generative AI; academic integrity; policy communication; sensemaking; urban higher education

Purpose

In November 2022, ChatGPT arrived faster than anything in higher education is supposed to move. Students adopted it before institutions had language for it, and faculty were left to figure out the rest (Sullivan et al., 2023). A 2023 national survey found that only about one in four faculty had received any institutional or departmental guidance on handling generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in their courses, while a large portion did not know whether a

policy existed at all (Primary Research Group, 2023). Roughly one in six had written their own course-level guidelines in the absence of institutional direction, showing where enforcement responsibility actually landed (Primary Research Group, 2023).

Humanities faculty are disproportionately affected by this gap. Writing is not a supporting skill in English, history, or philosophy courses; it is the primary evidence of student thinking, and GenAI can produce that evidence without the thinking behind it (Dempere et al., 2023; Francis et al., 2025). Angehr et al. (2026), in a survey of more than 3,000 U.S. faculty across disciplines and institution types, found that faculty in English, humanities, and history were among the most likely to report difficulty managing students' use of GenAI and the most likely to hold negative views of AI in their courses. Many of these faculty are enforcing GenAI academic integrity policies they had no hand in writing (Wang et al., 2024).

This carries a heavy weight in urban higher education. Research on GenAI policy has focused on elite and research institutions, including the top 100 U.S. universities (Wang et al., 2024), 116 R1 universities (McDonald et al., 2025), and the world's 50 top-ranked universities (Moorhouse et al., 2023). Less is known about how policy is written and communicated at urban-serving universities, regional comprehensive and other teaching-focused institutions, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions, or about how faculty at those institutions receive and interpret it.

This study examines how the enforcement experience of humanities faculty is shaped by how the policy was communicated to them in the first place, and whether that experience changes with the institution type. The primary research question is: How do humanities faculty interpret and respond to institutional GenAI policy communication? Secondary questions address

the role of the faculty in developing those policies, how framing and source affect perceptions of trust, and the challenges that emerge when policy communication is insufficient.

Framework

Two theoretical frameworks anchor this study. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) examines how information is presented and what is emphasized, highlighting whether institutional GenAI policy language positions the tool as a threat to be detected or a challenge for the teaching community to navigate. That framing does interpretive work before faculty engage with any specific policy requirement. Sensemaking theory, developed by Weick (1995) and applied to educational policy implementation by Spillane et al. (2002), explains what happens after the policy lands. People make sense of ambiguous information by drawing on what already seems reasonable given their professional situation, including their institutional experience and the trust they have in the message's source. For humanities faculty receiving a GenAI policy with no explanation of how it applies to writing-based assessment and no faculty input in its development, sensemaking theory predicts locally-adapted, uneven interpretation. Because sensemaking relies on the resources available in a faculty member's environment (Spillane et al., 2002), this framework highlights the importance of the institutional context. This means that the same policy wording can be understood and applied in different ways, especially when there is little support for its interpretation. The two frameworks together explain how institutions shape the message and how faculty may receive it differently from what institutions anticipate.

Literature Review

Academic integrity enforcement already rested largely on individual faculty before GenAI arrived (de Maio et al., 2020; Eaton et al., 2020), and the technology deepened that burden without providing adequate tools to support it. Detection software has not kept pace with

what it is supposed to detect. Chaudhry et al. (2023) found that AI detection tools failed to consistently identify AI-generated content across multiple platforms, with some AI-produced submissions receiving plagiarism scores of zero. Enforcement definitions are also unstable. GenAI produces original text that cannot be matched to any identifiable source (Eke, 2023), and Kofinas et al. (2025) found that experienced reviewers could not distinguish AI-assisted from student-authored submissions. Faculty are being asked to make enforcement decisions in those same conditions.

For humanities faculty, the problem extends into disciplinary territory. Writing in English, history, or philosophy is not a deliverable; it is the thought process the course is designed to develop (Dempere et al., 2023). Most institutional academic integrity policies apply uniform authorship standards across disciplines, leaving humanities faculty to read those policies against situations they were not written for (Eaton, 2023; Francis et al., 2025). Primary Research Group (2023) documented the widespread absence of formal institutional guidance on AI use, and Dotan et al. (2024) found faculty largely navigating enforcement through individually developed syllabus language.

There are also equity concerns when dealing with unclear policy communication that faculty must manage on their own. Liang et al. (2023) found that GenAI detection tools flagged writing by non-native English speakers at significantly higher rates than that of native speakers. When a policy does not tell faculty how to use the results of detection tools, individual instructors must decide whether that detection is grounds for misconduct, weighing evidence known to be biased often without guidance that would protect due process. Faculty also depend on teaching centers, instructional designers, and academic integrity offices to translate policy into classroom practice, and whether that support is equally available across institution types is

not known from existing research, which has concentrated on elite and research-intensive institutions (McDonald et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Existing research has also not examined how the way policy is communicated, rather than its content, affects how faculty understand and respond to it across institutions. That is the gap this study addresses.

Research Methodology

This paper is an in-progress study. As of this writing, the literature review and study design are complete; the study has not yet been submitted to the IRB for review, and no data have been collected. Nothing reported in this paper should be read as an empirical finding.

The study uses a three-phase mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The first phase involves qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014) of publicly available GenAI-related academic integrity policy documents, examining how GenAI is framed and what assumptions about faculty enforcement roles those documents reflect. The second phase is a survey of the humanities faculty in the sampled institutions, and the third phase is structured interviews with a subset of respondents.

Phase one draws a purposive, maximum-variation sample of 12 U.S. institutions stratified by Carnegie classification (doctoral, master's, baccalaureate, and associate's), with deliberate inclusion of urban-serving universities, regional comprehensive and other teaching-focused institutions, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions. Institutions are eligible if they have a publicly accessible GenAI policy, statement, or guidance document on academic integrity. Because GenAI policies change rapidly, all documents will be retrieved within the window from December 2026 through February 2027. For each document, the website, retrieval date, and any stated revision date will be logged, and an archived copy will be saved, so that the analysis describes policy as it stood when faculty were surveyed.

Phase two will survey full- and part-time humanities faculty who taught at least one course at a sampled institution within the prior and current academic year. These faculty will be recruited through publicly listed departmental contacts, social media, associations, and word of mouth. The survey target is 150 responses. Items will be written from phase one framing codes and the study's themes, such as how policy was received, the perceived frame, trust in the source, faculty input into policy development, and enforcement actions taken. Items will be reviewed for validity by two to three faculty members with expertise in policy or assessment. Then we will test them with a small group of humanities faculty, who will also be asked about the clarity and consistency of questions with multiple parts.

Survey respondents who opt in will be selected for interviews based on variations in institution type and appointment type, with a target of 12 to 15 participants. Survey responses and interview transcripts will be analyzed using thematic codes from the framing, sensemaking, and academic integrity literature, alongside data-driven codes emerging from the responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Schreier, 2014).

The phases are integrated at three points (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phase one codes build the survey items; Phase two results connect to Phase three by guiding participant selection and the interview protocol; and results from all three phases are merged in a joint display at the interpretation stage. That cross-phase comparison also serves as a check on trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Literature-Based Propositions

Because data collection has not started, this section reports no findings. This section's ideas were gathered from the literature reviewed above, so that the completed study can confirm, qualify, or reject them.

Proposition 1: Communication Shapes Response and Content

Current research documents what faculty do in response to GenAI policy without examining how the communication of that policy may shape those responses. Farazouli et al. (2025), in a qualitative study with faculty across sociology, philosophy, law, and education at a Swedish university, found that teachers experienced ChatGPT's arrival as both alarming and paralyzing, describing urgency to respond with uncertainty of how to respond. Those faculty members understood what was happening, but they did not have sufficient direction to combat it. Framing and sensemaking theory suggest that this uncertainty is developed by how the policy is received, which the study will examine directly.

Proposition 2: Threat Framing Will Be Associated with Detection Enforcement

Where policy positions GenAI primarily as a threat to be detected (Entman, 1993), faculty may be more likely to rely on detection tools, despite their documented unreliability (Chaudry et al., 2023) and language bias (Liang et al., 2023).

Proposition 3: Context Will Moderate Interpretation

Because sensemaking depends on internally available resources (Spillane et al., 2002), this study expects that faculty at institutions with less policy support will report more self-improvised enforcement, consistent with the syllabus-level revision discussed by Dotan et al. (2024). Whether this pattern holds across the targeted institutions is an open empirical question that the sampling design will attempt to examine.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, GenAI policies are frequently updated, so findings will reflect the policy in effect during the specific retrieval window. Purposive sampling focuses on getting deep insights and a range of perspectives rather than trying to

generalize the findings statistically. That means the results might not apply to every situation or institution out there. Third, survey and interview data are self-reported and may reflect social preferences around academic integrity. Finally, the propositions above are developed from literature that is collected from research universities and from outside the United States (Farazouli et al., 2025); their fit for this study targeted U.S. institutions is something that the tests rather than assume.

Scholarly Significance

The central argument of this study is that inconsistent GenAI academic integrity enforcement is a communication problem before it is a compliance problem. Institutions that develop GenAI policies without attending to how those policies reach the faculty responsible for enforcing them should expect the patterns the research already documents: uneven, locally adapted, and largely invisible to the institution (de Maio et al., 2020; Dotan et al., 2024; Eaton et al., 2020). By centering humanities faculty as both the most exposed population in GenAI enforcement and the least involved in policy development (Angehr et al., 2026), this study contributes to higher education policy, organizational communication, and AI governance conversations. By sampling outside of the elite and research universities that dominate the research, it also asks whether the burden of interpreting and enforcing unclear policy unequally falls on the faculty at the institutions that serve urban students. Humanities faculty who apply policies they did not help write, using professional judgment that no institutional guidance quite covers, are doing that work now. This research explores how faculty make sense of what they receive and what changes institutions need to make for a more equitable and consistent enforcement across all academic disciplines and institution types.

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Navigating Converging Pressures: 2026 Trends Shaping Urban Higher Education and Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to identify and describe the major trends shaping urban higher education and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in 2026. Higher education in the United States is navigating a period of significant disruption, marked by demographic shifts, federal policy changes, technological transformation, and heightened scrutiny of institutional value. For urban HBCUs—institutions that have historically served communities with the greatest need and the fewest resources—these pressures are particularly acute. The paper offers a systematic mapping of six converging trends that collectively define the current landscape, with particular attention to the implications for urban HBCUs and minority-serving institutions (MSIs). The intended audience includes higher education practitioners, researchers, faculty, and policymakers engaged with questions of access, equity, and institutional sustainability.

Framework

This paper employs trend mapping as its organizing framework. Trend mapping, or trend analysis, is a structured, descriptive approach used to systematically identify, categorize, and describe patterns emerging across a defined body of literature and documentation within a specified timeframe (Salkind, 2010). Rather than imposing a theoretical lens or advancing a normative argument, trend mapping aims to produce a clear and credible picture of the forces currently shaping a field. The approach is appropriate for the purpose of this paper, as it allows

multiple sources of varying types—accreditor and association reports, consulting and market analyses, trade press, and practitioner publications—to be synthesized into coherent, well-supported trend categories. The framework does not rank trends by importance but rather presents them as an interrelated system of pressures that institutions must navigate simultaneously.

Research Methodology

This paper employs document analysis as its primary research methodology. Document analysis is a systematic qualitative procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents—both printed and electronic—as a means of understanding and interpreting phenomena (Bowen, 2009). A corpus of 17 purposively selected documents published in 2025 and 2026 (one undated) was analyzed; Table 1 lists each document by source type, publication date, and focus. The corpus consists of gray literature in four categories: accreditor and professional association reports ($n = 4$), consulting and market research analyses ($n = 7$), higher education trade press ($n = 2$), and practitioner and vendor commentary ($n = 4$). The analysis focused on conditions emerging in 2026. Therefore, the corpus drew on timely gray literature rather than peer-reviewed empirical studies, which typically lag current events. Documents were selected based on their direct relevance to trends in higher education, with particular attention to sources addressing HBCUs, MSIs, and urban institutions.

Analysis proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, each document was reviewed for explicit or implicit references to trends, challenges, or shifts in higher education practice and policy. In the second phase, recurring patterns were grouped thematically using an inductive coding process, with particular attention to trends that appeared across multiple source types,

thereby increasing corroboration. Trends were then mapped to their HBCU and urban institution implications, drawing on sources that addressed these contexts specifically.

Source quality was appraised using criteria adapted from Bowen (2009): the authority of the authoring organization, the transparency of the evidence underlying each claim (e.g., original survey or enrollment data versus expert forecast), relevance to urban institutions and HBCUs, and currency relative to the 2026 policy environment. Claims grounded in original data were given greater weight than opinion-based forecasts. Several sources are produced by organizations that sell services to colleges and universities. Therefore, claims appearing only in vendor-authored sources were treated as indicative rather than conclusive. Time-sensitive federal policy, enrollment, and funding claims were further verified against primary sources—federal statutes, executive orders, U.S. Department of Education releases, and national data reports. These verification sources are cited in the text but were not part of the analytic corpus.

Table 1

Document by Source Type, Date, and Focus

Source	Type	Date	Focus
The Chronicle of Higher Education (2026)	Trade press	Mar. 2026	Expert forecasts across sector trends
CliftonLarsonAllen (2026)	Consulting/market research	Jan. 2026	Financial resilience and innovation
EAB (2026)	Consulting/market research	Jan. 2026	Community college and enrollment trends
EDUCAUSE (2025)	Association/accreditor	Oct. 2025	Technology and AI priorities
EdVisorly (2025)	Practitioner/vendor	n.d.	General sector trends
Hanover Research (2025)	Consulting/market research	2025	Student retention strategies
Hanover Research (2026)	Consulting/market research	Mar. 2026	General sector trends
Higher Learning Commission (2026)	Association/accreditor	2026	Sector trends from an accreditor's perspective

Source	Type	Date	Focus
HolonIQ (2026)	Consulting/market research	Jan. 2026	Education market and technology trends
IBISWorld (2026)	Consulting/market research	2026	Industry finances and outlook
Inside Higher Ed (2025)	Trade press	Dec. 2025	Student success
InsideTrack (2026)	Practitioner/vendor	Jan. 2026	Student success and coaching
Kropp (2026)	Practitioner/vendor	2026	Sector predictions
McNaughton & Netting (2025)	Practitioner/vendor	Dec. 2025	Institutional planning and outlook
National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity (2026)	Association/accreditor	Feb. 2026	Faculty development
Tyton Partners (2026)	Consulting/market research	Jan. 2026	General sector trends
UPCEA (2025)	Association/accreditor	Dec. 2025	Online and professional education

Note. Full citations appear in the reference list. Source types: association/accreditor (n = 4), consulting/market research (n = 7), trade press (n = 2), practitioner/vendor (n = 4).

Findings/Results

Document analysis revealed six major trend clusters shaping urban higher education and HBCUs in 2026.

Trend 1: Strategic and Agentic AI Integration. Across virtually all sources, artificial intelligence emerged as a primary institutional force (EDUCAUSE, 2025; HolonIQ, 2026; Tyton Partners, 2026). The focus in 2026 has shifted from experimentation to enterprise-wide governance, with institutions developing comprehensive AI policies to address academic integrity, data privacy, and ethical use. Agentic AI—tools capable of autonomous administrative and academic task management—is emerging as a major operational priority. Urban HBCUs face both opportunity and risk in this trend, with smaller institutions often lacking the infrastructure for rapid AI adoption while also having the most to gain from AI-driven efficiency.

Trend 2: Return on Investment (ROI) and Workforce-Aligned Credentials.

Institutions face intense pressure to demonstrate the tangible economic value of a degree (Hanover Research, 2026; UPCEA, 2025). The pressure has accelerated the growth of microcredentials, digital badges, and short-term certificates. Paul Quinn College, an urban HBCU in Dallas and a federally designated Work College, has been cited as a national model for integrating work-based learning into the curriculum, directly connecting academics to employment outcomes while preserving liberal arts values.

Trend 3: The Demographic Cliff and Enrollment Shifts. The number of U.S. high school graduates is projected to have peaked in 2025 and to decline by about 13% through 2041, a contraction driven largely by declining birth rates following the 2007–2009 Great Recession (Lane et al., 2024). The fall 2026 entering class is therefore the first drawn from a shrinking graduating cohort, and the decline is expected to continue for more than a decade. At the same time, 2.1 million students newly stopped out of college without a credential between January 2022 and July 2023, contributing to a population of 43.1 million Americans with some college but no credential (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025). Notably, urban institutions are predicted to fare better than rural campuses due to greater access to adult learner populations and local enrollment pipelines (EAB, 2026). Urban HBCUs may leverage this geographic advantage through targeted re-enrollment initiatives.

Trend 4: Holistic Student Success and Hyper-Personalized Support. Student retention in 2026 is increasingly tied to integrated, proactive support systems that address academic, financial, and emotional needs simultaneously (Hanover Research, 2025; Inside Higher Ed, 2025; InsideTrack, 2026). For HBCUs, which enroll large proportions of first-generation students and students of color, hyper-personalized success coaching has emerged as a

critical retention strategy. These models recognize that systemic barriers and imposter syndrome require individualized, consistent points of contact to support belonging and degree completion.

Trend 5: Federal Regulatory Shifts and the Workforce Pell Grant. New federal legislation, particularly the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (2025)—signed into law on July 4, 2025, and now referred to by the U.S. Department of Education as the Working Families Tax Cuts Act—is reshaping the financial aid landscape. The Workforce Pell Grant, effective July 1, 2026, extends Pell eligibility to short-term programs of 8 to 15 weeks (150 to 599 clock hours) that a state governor certifies as aligned with high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand occupations, creating significant demand for workforce-aligned credentials. Two sources predict that institutions, including urban HBCUs, are positioning themselves to capitalize on this shift by strengthening employer partnerships and reviewing certificate offerings for federal eligibility (Higher Learning Commission, 2026; UPCEA, 2025). Simultaneously, a new federal earnings test finalized in June 2026 requires undergraduate programs to show that completers out-earn working adults aged 25 to 34 with only a high school diploma; programs that fail in two of three years lose Direct Loan eligibility (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). The test replaces the earnings framework of the 2023 Gainful Employment regulations, adding compliance pressure for smaller institutions.

Trend 6: Federal Funding Shifts, DEI Rollbacks, and Institutional Resilience. Perhaps the most consequential trend for HBCUs specifically is the intersection of shifting federal funding and DEI rollbacks. Two January 2025 executive orders directed federal agencies to terminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices, positions, and equity-related grants, and required federal contractors and grant recipients to certify that they do not operate DEI programs that violate federal antidiscrimination law, creating tension between institutional mission and political compliance requirements (Exec. Order No. 14151, 2025; Exec. Order No.

14173, 2025). In September 2025, the U.S. Department of Education ended approximately \$350 million in discretionary grants for seven MSI programs, including Strengthening Predominantly Black Institutions and Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions, while announcing a one-time \$495 million increase for HBCUs and Tribal Colleges and Universities (Arrojas, 2025). The federal funding picture is therefore uneven rather than uniformly reduced: HBCUs received a short-term increase, whereas other MSIs lost discretionary support, and one-time allocations offer a limited basis for long-term planning. Despite these pressures, the fundamental need for belonging and equity-centered support remains critical to student success outcomes. HBCUs are responding by reframing their missions, leveraging private philanthropy, and pursuing public-private partnerships to diversify revenue streams (CliftonLarsonAllen, 2026).

Limitations

Several limitations bound the interpretation of these findings. First, the corpus is small (17 documents) and purposively selected, and it consists entirely of gray literature rather than peer-reviewed empirical research. Several sources are produced by organizations that sell services to colleges and universities, and forward-looking trend pieces may emphasize issues aligned with those services. Second, the documents analyzed address higher education nationally rather than HBCUs or urban institutions specifically; implications for urban HBCUs were often inferred and should be read as informed propositions rather than empirical findings. Third, trend mapping is descriptive: it identifies patterns of emphasis across documents but does not measure the prevalence, magnitude, or institutional effects of those trends. Finally, the 2026 federal policy environment is changing rapidly; the statutes, regulations, executive actions, and funding decisions described here reflect information available as of October 2026 and may change

through subsequent rulemaking, litigation, or appropriations. Future research should test these trends against institutional data and the perspectives of HBCU leaders.

Scholarly Significance

This paper makes several contributions to the scholarly and practitioner literature on urban higher education and HBCUs. First, it provides a timely, synthesized trend map at a critical inflection point—2026—when multiple converging pressures are simultaneously reshaping institutional priorities and student outcomes. No single trend in isolation tells the full story; it is their convergence that defines the current challenge for urban HBCUs.

Second, by centering the analysis on urban HBCUs and MSIs, this paper surfaces institutional realities that are frequently underrepresented in broader higher education trend literature. The adaptive strategies documented here—from UNCF re-enrollment coaching to the Paul Quinn College work-college model—offer transferable insights for practitioners working in resource-constrained, mission-driven institutions.

Third, this paper speaks directly to ICUE's mission of examining critical social justice issues in urban education. The simultaneous increase in institutional demands and instability of targeted federal support for HBCUs and other MSIs represents a structural equity concern with direct implications for the communities these institutions serve. By systematically mapping this tension, this paper provides a foundation for future research, policy advocacy, and practitioner action.

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What 122 Teachers Taught Me: Practical Systems for Supporting Multilingual Learners With Disabilities

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Abstract

Teachers of multilingual learners with disabilities (MLWD) must distinguish language development from disability while teaching to both, yet few are prepared to do so. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study surveyed 122 K–12 teachers in a southeastern U.S. state using the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale and interviewed eight teachers in different career stages. Kruskal–Wallis tests showed significant career-stage differences in all three self-efficacy domains ($\eta^2 = .08\text{--}.11$), driven by lower self-efficacy among early-career teachers; beyond the early-career stage, additional experience brought no detectable difference. Interviews suggested that professional development (PD) rarely addressed language and disability together, that confidence was built largely through individual trial and error, and that it remained constrained by limited planning time, scarce MLWD-specific materials, and the difficulty of separating language from disability. The paper translates these findings into four practical systems for urban schools.

Keywords: teacher self-efficacy, multilingual learners with disabilities, career stage, urban education

Purpose

Urban districts across the country serve growing numbers of multilingual learners with disabilities (MLWD), students who sit at the intersection of English language development and special education, two systems that were built separately and rarely coordinate. Teachers

responsible for MLWD students are asked to do something most preparation programs never directly teach: to distinguish between a student who is still acquiring English and one with a learning disability, and then to teach in a way that serves both realities at once (Klingner et al., 2006). This paper reports a mixed-methods study of 122 K–12 teachers' self-efficacy in supporting MLWD across teachers' career stages and translates its findings into practical systems urban schools can implement now.

Framework

The study is grounded in Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which holds that teachers' beliefs about their own capability shape the effort they invest, their persistence when instruction is difficult, and ultimately their practice. Because mastery experience is the most influential source of self-efficacy beliefs, the theory predicts that confidence should grow with years of teaching (Bandura, 1997; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) operationalized teacher self-efficacy in three domains: classroom management, instructional strategies, and student engagement. This study treats the relationship between career-stage experience and self-efficacy as an open question for MLWD, asking whether confidence continues to differ across a full career and whether it reflects readiness for this population.

Research Methodology

Design

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which a quantitative survey phase was followed by a qualitative interview phase designed to explain the survey results. The study received Institutional Review Board approval, and participants provided informed consent.

Setting, Recruitment, and Participants

From December 2024 to January 2025, the researcher recruited teachers through professional networks and social media (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn) to complete an online Qualtrics survey, focusing on 11 metro-area school districts in a southeastern U.S. state with large, growing multilingual learner populations. Eligible participants were in-service K–12 teachers with current or prior experience teaching at least one MLWD, confirmed through a screening question. The final sample included 122 K–12 educators in general education, special education (SPED), English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), co-teaching, and other support roles across elementary, middle, and high school settings. Participants were predominantly female (99%); approximately 47% identified as White, 43% as Black or African American, and the remainder as Hispanic/Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Most (87%) held a master's degree or higher.

The researcher defined career stage based on teachers' self-reported years of teaching experience, collected in the survey's demographic section. Teachers selected the range that matched their years of teaching, and responses were grouped into four stages: early career (1–5 years; $n = 15$), mid-career (6–10 years; $n = 22$), late career (11–20 years; $n = 43$), and very late career (21 or more years; $n = 42$). The researcher treated the first five years separately to capture the early-career period and separated the second and third decades so that differences among experienced teachers would be visible rather than combined into a single group.

Instrument

Teachers rated themselves on the 24-item long form of the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), which measures self-efficacy beliefs in classroom management, instructional strategies, and student engagement on a 9-point scale (1 =

nothing, 9 = a great deal). The long form (24 items) was selected for its comprehensive coverage and established reliability, with Cronbach's alpha typically exceeding .90 (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). The researcher added contextual instructions to the survey directions asking teachers to respond with reference to their work with MLWD; the researcher did not change any item wording. Before distribution, the researcher also pilot-tested the survey with three practicing teachers, who confirmed that the directions and items were clear.

Quantitative Analysis

Data were analyzed in R (R Core Team, 2020). Missing values were estimated using multiple imputations (van Buuren, 2018). Because the data violated normality assumptions and career-stage groups were unequal in size, differences across the four career stages in each TSES domain were tested with Kruskal–Wallis tests, a nonparametric alternative to one-way analysis of variance (Field et al., 2012). Eta squared (η^2) was reported as the effect size (small = .01, moderate = .06, large = .14; Tomczak & Tomczak, 2014). Significant omnibus tests were followed by Dunn's pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment (Dinno, 2015).

Interview Selection and Qualitative Analysis

For the qualitative phase, survey participants could volunteer for a follow-up interview on the final page of the survey. From these volunteers, the researcher selected eight teachers using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) to represent a range of career stages, instructional roles, and TSES score levels. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews online via Microsoft Teams; they lasted 30 to 45 minutes ($M = 36.50$, $SD = 5.81$), were audio-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim. The researcher then coded the transcripts using a hybrid deductive–inductive approach (Saldaña, 2021): the three TSES domains served as a priori categories, and codes within them were developed inductively from teachers' accounts.

Member checking confirmed the accuracy of participants' accounts (Birt et al., 2016). Interview participants are identified by number (e.g., Teacher 1).

Integration of Strands

The two strands were connected at two points. First, survey results informed interview sampling, with participants selected across career stages and score levels. Second, during interpretation, joint displays placed each domain's statistical results beside representative interview evidence and compared interviewed teachers' domain scores with their own descriptions of practice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This allowed the researcher to check each quantitative pattern against teachers' accounts and, where the two diverged, examine the divergence rather than average it away.

Findings

Survey Results

Table 1 reports mean self-efficacy by domain and career stage. In every domain, early-career teachers reported the lowest self-efficacy means, and late-career teachers the highest. Kruskal–Wallis tests showed significant differences across career stages in all three domains, with moderate effect sizes (Table 2): classroom management, $\chi^2(3) = 16.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$; instructional strategies, $\chi^2(3) = 12.77, p = .005, \eta^2 = .08$; and student engagement, $\chi^2(3) = 13.12, p = .004, \eta^2 = .09$.

Table 1

Mean Self-Efficacy by TSES Domain and Career Stage

Career stage	<i>n</i>	Classroom management <i>M (SD)</i>	Instructional strategies <i>M (SD)</i>	Student engagement <i>M (SD)</i>
Early (1–5 years)	15	4.56 (0.97)	4.76 (1.25)	4.60 (0.73)
Mid (6–10 years)	22	5.36 (1.21)	5.47 (1.14)	5.34 (1.03)

Career stage	<i>n</i>	Classroom management <i>M (SD)</i>	Instructional strategies <i>M (SD)</i>	Student engagement <i>M (SD)</i>
Late (11–20 years)	43	5.79 (0.84)	5.91 (1.00)	5.74 (1.17)
Very late (21+ years)	42	5.73 (0.88)	5.83 (0.86)	5.67 (1.00)

Note. *N* = 122. Scores range from 1 (nothing) to 9 (a great deal).

Table 2

Kruskal–Wallis Tests of Career-Stage Differences by Domain

Domain	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Classroom management	16.40	3	< .001	.11
Instructional strategies	12.77	3	.005	.08
Student engagement	13.12	3	.004	.09

Note. *N* = 122. Dunn's pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment showed that early-

career teachers scored themselves significantly lower than late- and very-late-career teachers in all three domains; mid-career teachers did not differ significantly from either later group.

The pairwise comparisons locate where these differences lie. In all three domains, early-career teachers reported significantly lower self-efficacy than late- and very-late-career teachers. In contrast, mid-career teachers did not differ significantly from either later group. Very-late-career means were slightly below late-career means in every domain, but that small difference was not among the significant comparisons. Because the design is cross-sectional, these are differences between groups of teachers rather than growth within individuals. Read that way, the data show a clear gap between teachers in their first five years and those past their first decade, and no detectable difference among teachers beyond the early-career stage: teachers with more than 20 years of experience did not differ significantly from colleagues with 6 to 10 years. This pattern is consistent with Klassen and Chiu (2010), who found that the relationship between teaching experience and self-efficacy is nonlinear rather than a steady climb across the career.

Student engagement warrants particular attention. It was the lowest-scoring domain for mid-, late-, and very-late-career teachers and the second lowest for early-career teachers, whose lowest domain was classroom management. These within-stage differences were small (0.17 points or less) and were not tested statistically, so they indicate a descriptive pattern rather than an established effect. Even so, engagement was the domain in which the most experienced teachers' confidence remained lowest, and the interviews tied it most directly to conditions outside an individual teacher's control.

Interview Findings

Interview accounts explained the survey pattern through three themes.

Theme 1: Preparation Rarely Addressed the Intersection of Language and Disability

Early-career teachers' lower scores matched descriptions of being underprepared. As one teacher explained, "The biggest issue is the lack of training. I was not prepared for the behavior challenges I faced." Teacher 1 could not recall any PD on this population: "I don't think I've ever had professional development related to multilingual learners with disabilities. In-school PD? No." The gap was not limited to early-career teachers. Where PD existed, teachers described it as divided along the same lines as the systems themselves. Teacher 3 explained, "I've received SPED PD. I've received ESOL PD. But never when the two crosses. So that has been a difficulty." Teacher 8, with more than 20 years in the classroom, described training that "tends to be more focused on procedural aspects, not strategies," and Teacher 2 recalled sessions about students' life circumstances rather than instruction: "It wasn't like, these approaches would work. It was more of, this is how their life is." No participant described training in using students' home languages as an instructional resource for MLWD. Across career stages, teachers had rarely been prepared for the specific intersection their students occupied.

Theme 2: Confidence Was Built Through Trial and Error

With little targeted preparation, teachers described the confidence they gained over time as largely self-built. “For my confidence level, it is a lot of trial and error,” one mid-career teacher explained. A late-career teacher reflected, “Over the years, I’ve learned what works... but I wish I had more training early on.” A mid-career teacher described learning to scaffold intentionally (just giving them the modified worksheet isn’t enough. You must scaffold”) and build systematized supports, such as binders with translated vocabulary lists and sentence frames, mostly on their own.

In Bandura’s (1997) terms, this is growth through mastery experience with little support from other self-efficacy sources, such as vicarious learning from observing skilled colleagues. Teacher 5, a late-career teacher, described that missing source: “I learn best from watching other teachers, but we rarely have time for structured collaboration.” This may help explain why self-efficacy differences were concentrated in the early-career years. Once teachers had learned what trial and error could teach them, few structures existed to extend that growth.

Theme 3: Engagement Was Constrained by Barriers Experience Did Not Remove

Teachers described engagement as constrained by barriers that experience did not remove. Some were emotional: sometimes they feel like they don’t belong. It’s hard to engage them when they’re struggling emotionally. Others reflected persistent uncertainty about whether a student’s difficulty stemmed from language development or disability: “understanding if it’s a language barrier or a cognitive issue... difficult to decipher.” Teacher 2, an early-career teacher, described colleagues mistaking vocabulary gaps for processing delays, and Teacher 5, a late-career teacher, named the staffing gap behind that confusion: “You don’t often find teachers trained to support both. That’s a gap.”

Teachers also described too little planning time to coordinate ESOL and SPED instruction and a shortage of materials designed for MLWD. Teacher 1, an early-career teacher, summarized the result: “The biggest issue is the lack of curriculum. There are no structured materials for multilingual learners with disabilities, so we must create our own resources.”

Teachers described adapting materials built for one population to serve another, work that fell to individual teachers rather than to the systems around them. Early-career teachers felt gaps in training and institutional support most acutely, but the gaps were not confined to them.

Integrated Interpretation

Integrating the two strands produced the study's central interpretation. The career-stage gap in self-efficacy was real, but the interviews suggest it narrowed largely through individual trial and error rather than structured preparation, and the lack of detectable differences beyond the early-career stage is consistent with confidence leveling off once teachers built what they could on their own. Higher scores also did not always mean teachers felt prepared: experienced, higher-scoring teachers still described gaps in their training, and teachers across career stages described the language-versus-disability determination as among the most difficult parts of their work. In this study, TSES scores appear to capture general instructional confidence more reliably than readiness for the specific demands of teaching MLWD, a distinction addressed in the limitations below.

Practical Systems

The findings point toward specific, buildable systems rather than another round of general PD. Four are offered here as starting points for urban and metro-area schools and districts.

First, keep supporting teachers in the past the early years. In this sample, the difference lay between teachers in their first five years and those past their first decade; beyond the early-career stage, additional years showed no detectable difference in self-efficacy. Support that tapers once teachers are no longer early career assumes growth will continue its own, and these data offer no evidence that it does. Teachers in year 15 and year 25 need support designed for where they are, not a repeat of induction. Because late- and very-late-career teachers in this study had built their confidence largely through their own practice, the most promising addition is the source of self-efficacy they described as missing: structured opportunities to learn from colleagues, such as peer observation, instructional rounds, and collaborative inquiry into specific students (Bandura, 1997).

Moreover, build integrated, engagement-focused professional learning, not separate ESOL and SPED tracks or generic management and curriculum coaching. Engagement was the domain where experienced teachers' confidence remained lowest and where teachers tied it most closely to emotional and linguistic barriers, so generic instructional coaching is likely to miss it. Coaching cycles that target how teachers actively involve MLWD in instruction, sustained over time rather than delivered in one-time workshops, reflect the features Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identify in PD that changes practice. Just as important, learning should be designed jointly by ESOL and SPED specialists, so teachers are prepared for the point where the two needs meet in the same student, rather than for each need in isolation. Additionally, protect shared planning time between ESOL and SPED staff. Teachers named the lack of coordinated planning time as a structural barrier, not a personal shortcoming. Shared planning is also where the two specialists best positioned to answer the language-versus-disability question (Klingner et al., 2006) can examine it together. A master schedule that never puts these two staff groups in the

same room at the same time will keep producing the same gap, however skilled either individual teacher becomes.

Lastly, build or source instructional resources designed for the MLWD intersection, rather than assuming ESOL materials or SPED materials will each stretch to cover both. Teachers described making do by adapting one set of materials for a population they were not built for. That adaptation labor is real, ongoing, and invisible in most school improvement plans.

Limitations

Several limitations bound these findings. First, participants were recruited through professional networks and social media in one southeastern state, and the sample was nearly all females; it is not representative of all teachers, and teachers who chose to respond may differ from those who did not. Career-stage groups were also unequal in size, with only 15 early-career teachers. Second, the design is cross-sectional. Differences between career-stage groups may reflect cohort or attrition effects rather than change within individual teachers, so the pattern described here is a between-group pattern, not a growth trajectory. Third, the TSES measures self-reported beliefs and was not developed specifically for teachers of MLWD. Also, the interview subsample of eight teachers was selected for variation rather than representativeness; the qualitative themes illustrate and explain the survey patterns rather than estimate how common they are. Finally, and most important for practice, self-efficacy is a belief about capability, not demonstrated instructional competence. This study did not observe instruction or measure student outcomes. Future research should pair self-efficacy measures with classroom observation and student data and follow teachers over time.

Scholarly Significance

This study contributes to urban education in three ways. First, it complicates the assumption that experience alone builds readiness for MLWD: among teachers past the early-career stage, more years were not associated with higher efficacy. Second, by integrating self-efficacy scores with teachers' accounts, it shows that self-efficacy captures general instructional confidence more reliably than readiness for this population, a caution for districts that use confidence as a proxy for readiness in staffing and support decisions. Third, the study also translates these findings into four concrete systems urban schools can build now.

Most systems front-load support for new teachers and then step back, trusting experience to finish the job. For teachers of MLWD, these data suggest experience does part of the job and then stops. The measurable difference lies between the first five years and the second decade; beyond that, more years brought no detectable gain. The most experienced teachers, often the ones schools rely on most, did not rate their confidence significantly higher than teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience. Several interviewees also described building that confidence on their own, through trial and error, without the preparation they wish they had received. The gap is a design problem, not a teacher problem, and design can solve it. The four systems above are a starting point, not a finished blueprint; each school's version will depend on its staffing, schedule, and community. If your team recognizes its own building in these findings, in the plateau, in the engagement gap, in the planning time nobody protected—I welcome the conversation at jocelyn@abovegrades.com.

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Entrepreneurship Education as an Applied STEM and AI Framework for Advancing Equity in Urban Schools

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Abstract

Urban schools face persistent inequities in access to high quality STEM learning and career-connected experiences. This conceptual paper examines the Junior Business Academy (JBA), a K-12 entrepreneurship education model developed by Clutch Consulting, as a framework for connecting entrepreneurship with applied mathematics, computational thinking, design, and responsible artificial intelligence literacy. A focused narrative synthesis draws on scholarship concerning entrepreneurship education, STEM identity, culturally responsive pedagogy, community cultural wealth, computational thinking, and AI literacy. Because the materials available do not document a systematic empirical study, the paper does not claim demonstrated program effects. Instead, it analyzes JBA as a conceptual program model and proposes a logic model and evaluation approach. The analysis identifies conditions under which entrepreneurship projects may support relevant STEM learning: explicit disciplinary objectives, student participation in authentic problem-solving, recognition of community knowledge, and equitable access to tools and mentors. It also identifies safeguards for AI use, including privacy, bias review, educator oversight, and non-AI alternatives. The paper contributes a practical framework for designing and evaluating community-connected STEM entrepreneurship in urban education.

Keywords: urban education, entrepreneurship education, STEM identity, computational thinking, AI literacy, culturally responsive pedagogy

Purpose

Unequal access to rigorous STEM experiences and career connected learning makes it important to examine approaches that let students apply academic knowledge to problems meaningful to them and their communities. This paper asks: How can a K-12 entrepreneurship education model such as JBA be designed and evaluated to support relevant STEM learning, student agency, and equitable participation in urban school contexts? JBA uses age appropriate business challenges to engage students in identifying needs, researching audiences, developing ideas, reasoning about resources, revising solutions, and communicating proposals. The educational aim is not to imply that every student will become a business owner, but to create an applied context for transferable inquiry, quantitative reasoning, design, collaboration, and communication.

Conceptual Framework

Five perspectives inform the analysis. First, entrepreneurship education can involve learning about, for, and through creating value; it should not be reduced to venture launch or assumed to produce economic outcomes (Lackéus, 2015). A systematic review by Nabi et al. (2017) also cautions that entrepreneurship education research needs clear theory and stronger evaluation. Second, computational thinking includes formulating problems, decomposing tasks, identifying patterns, and developing or revising solutions (Wing, 2006). Integrated STEM and engineering design offer opportunities to connect disciplines around meaningful problems, provided educators make learning goals explicit (National Research Council, 2012, 2013).

Third, STEM identity and participation are shaped by opportunities to demonstrate competence and receive recognition (Carlone & Johnson, 2007; Nasir, 2012). Fourth, culturally relevant pedagogy and community cultural wealth emphasize academic rigor while recognizing

students' cultural knowledge, languages, relationships, aspirations, and community expertise as assets (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Yosso, 2005). Social capital also draws attention to how networks can provide access to resources, while reminding educators to consider who is included in those networks (Bourdieu, 1986). These perspectives suggest that community relevance must be co-designed with students and partners, not assumed or framed through deficit narratives.

Fifth, AI literacy requires critical evaluation and responsible use, not simply access to a generative tool (Long & Magerko, 2020). UNESCO (2023) emphasizes human-centered educational use, privacy, inclusion, and appropriate oversight. In JBA, AI should be used only where school policy permits, as an optional support for brainstorming or comparing scenarios. Students should verify claims, identify limitations and bias, disclose AI assistance, and explain their own decisions. Personally identifiable student information should not be entered into public AI tools.

Research Methodology / Scholarly Approach

This manuscript uses a conceptual program-analysis approach informed by a focused narrative synthesis of scholarship. It is not an empirical study, systematic review, or program evaluation. The supplied materials do not establish the sites, participant counts, implementation duration, data sources, measures, analytic procedures, or research approvals needed to support claims of measured student outcomes. The analysis therefore organizes scholarship into the five perspectives above, translates them into program-design principles, and develops a proposed logic model and evaluation agenda. The literature was selected purposively for conceptual relevance rather than through an exhaustive systematic search; findings from other age groups or settings are applied cautiously to K-12 urban contexts.

Ethical status is not established in the materials provided. This paper does not report student level data or claim IRB approval. Any future research involving student interviews, surveys, observations, identifiable work, or recordings should follow applicable school and district review procedures and obtain required ethics determinations, parental permission, student assent, and privacy protections.

Findings / Conceptual Analysis

Three design propositions emerge from the synthesis. First, entrepreneurship can bridge STEM practices when the learning goals are explicit. Students might gather and interpret data, compare costs, model a process, test a prototype, and explain how evidence informed a decision. A business themed activity alone is not evidence of STEM learning; student reasoning and artifacts should be assessed against clear criteria.

Second, equity depends on recognition, access, and participation. Students should help define relevant problems, draw on community knowledge, receive meaningful roles, and access materials, feedback, and equitably. Mentors may broaden networks, but partnerships do not automatically remove structural barriers. Third, AI ethics should be embedded in instruction. Lesson plans should specify approved tools, prohibited data, verification practices, disclosure expectations, educator review, and non-AI alternatives.

These are conceptual propositions, not observed JBA outcomes. A proposed logic model includes inputs (curriculum, educators, accessible materials, approved technology, community partners) support activities (problem definition, research, quantitative analysis, design iteration, reflection, and presentation), producing outputs (sessions, student artifacts, prototypes, and presentations). Intended near term outcomes include improved explanations of STEM reasoning, evidence use, iterative design, collaboration, and AI critique. Indicators could include rubric

scored work, reflections, observation records, and approved surveys. Longer term interest or pathway outcomes require longitudinal evidence and should not be inferred from program participation alone.

Scholarly Significance

This paper contributes a theory informed framework for positioning entrepreneurship as an applied context for STEM learning while avoiding unsupported claims that participation causes business ownership, economic mobility, stronger municipal tax bases, or improved school funding. Those outcomes depend on multiple contextual and policy conditions. For educators, JBA's potential value rests on alignment with grade level objectives, rigorous assessment of student reasoning, and culturally responsive project design. For school leaders, implementation requires educator preparation, accessible materials, approved technology, and data governance. For community partners, collaboration should be reciprocal and respectful of local expertise. Future evaluation should document sites, grade levels, duration, participation, measures, scoring procedures, limitations, and ethical approvals; report mixed or null findings as well as positive findings; and distinguish implementation evidence from evidence of impact. JBA should ultimately be judged by the quality and equity of student learning opportunities, not by novelty of branding or the presence of AI.

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