Original Research

Disrupting Inequitable Practices in Special Education: Privileging Voices of Middle School Students With High-Incidence Disability Classifications

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Abstract

Black, Latinx and other minoritized students have long been overrepresented in the high-incidence disability classifications. Special education places these students on trajectories that deny them access to quality education and the same postschool opportunities and outcomes as their nondisabled peers. Using disability critical race studies (DisCrit), this study foregrounds the voices of minoritized middle school students receiving special education services under high-incidence classifications. DisCrit allowed for an investigation of how students' intersecting marginalized identities impacted their experiences in special education. Using a qualitative thematic approach, four themes describing students' perspectives emerged: (1) students' lack of awareness of their special education status, (2) students' perceptions of special education services, (3) challenging academic experiences in middle school, and (4) minimal opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns.

Keywords: overrepresentation; minoritized students; special education; disability critical race studies (DisCrit); student voice; qualitative thematic analysis

Introduction

Decades of scholarship describe the longstanding problem of the overrepresentation of minoritized students in special education (Aloi & Bialka, 2022; Artiles et al., 2010; Dunn, 1968), and while the causes of overrepresentation are complex, one reason this phenomenon persists stems from the systematic silencing and marginalization of minoritized students and families. The dominance of the medical model of disability, for example, and the professionalization of the field of special education restricts students' and families' opportunities to participate meaningfully in special education decision-making, rendering their strengths, needs, concerns, and goals invisible. In other words, special education's obsession with medicalization privileges professional expertise and assumes students and families have nothing of value to contribute (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Reid & Valle, 2004).

Additionally, instead of championing equality, the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) supreme court ruling and subsequent special education legislation instead invented alternate ways of perpetuating segregation in schools through the racialization of disability (Blanchett et al., 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005). Inappropriate placement of minoritized students in special education limits their educational opportunities and achievement, constrains their post-school outcomes, and fuels the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al., 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (2004) mandates equal treatment of students, families, and educators as members of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team. Despite this legislation, students and families continue to be pushed to the margins during special education processes (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012).

Minoritized communities also contend with deficit views that locate blame within students and their families when

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they fail to conform to white middle class notions of academic and behavioral success (Ahram et al., 2011). In addition to contributing to the overrepresentation of Black and other minoritized students in the subjective, high-incidence disability classifications, including specific learning disability (SLD), intellectual disability (ID), speech or language impairment (SLI), and emotional disturbance (ED), deficit views legitimate exclusionary practices that sideline student and family involvement in special education including referral and eligibility determination, IEP development, and placement decisions. High-stakes educational decisions made with partial or inaccurate information based on deficit views of students and their families exacerbates overrepresentation by misinterpreting student's needs, inappropriately disabling them, and resegregating them into restrictive settings where they receive lower quality special education supports and experience higher rates of exclusionary discipline than their white counterparts (Waitoller et al., 2010).

Despite extensive research documenting the existence of disproportionality and its causes and consequences for students, claims have been made that minoritized students are underrepresented in special education (Morgan et al., 2015). While scholars have raised concerns about the deficit-oriented arguments and methods underlying this work (Collins et al., 2016), these views have gained traction both in the academy and in the press surfacing deeply held beliefs related to the kinds of knowledge and research that are valued in a cisheteropatriarchal society. Given the existence of this divide within the field of special education, additional qualitative research that centers the lived experiences and the voices of multiply marginalized students is necessary.

Purpose of the Study

Existing research provides extensive information investigating the layered causes of overrepresentation, discusses statistics detailing how various minoritized groups are affected, describes dismal student outcomes, and documents and critiques attempts to resolve the problem. Despite this robust body of work, little is known about the real-life experiences of students after special education recommendations are made. The purpose of this study was to understand, and bring to the forefront, the experiences of minoritized middle school students with high-incidence disability classifications as they navigated special education placement in an urban district.

Perspectives of middle school students are particularly valuable given that middle school performance often determines high school opportunities. Further, while IDEA 2004 requires student participation in IEP development and transition planning beginning at age fourteen, middle school students below this age limit are less likely to attend IEP meetings and thus have fewer opportunities to share their experiences and concerns. The goals of this study are aligned with the whole schooling approach—specifically its principles of empowering citizens for democracy and partnering with families and the community. Not only are students capable of participating in educational decision-making, their voices and opinions, as well as those of their families and communities, are necessary if we are to build more equitable learning environments for all.

Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit)

DisCrit is an intersectional theoretical framework that examines the interdependent relationship between racism and ablesim and how these forces converge in institutions including schools (Annamma et al., 2013). Drawing on Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies, DisCrit reveals how students with intersecting marginalized identities are denied equal access to educational opportunities through the racialization of ability.

Since DisCrit is informed by a Disability Studies stance, this framework is a particularly useful tool in investigating how disproportionality in special education is created and reproduced (Annamma et al., 2013). In other words, DisCrit reveals how medicalized conceptualizations of disability central to special education policies and procedures locate blame for academic difficulties in individuals ignoring systemic inequities and leading to the overrepresentation of minoritized students in high-incidence disability classifications. Further, DisCrit's assertion that racism and ableism operate in neutralized and invisible ways allows for interrogation of special education's continued overreliance on purportedly objective assessment and eligibility determination processes that overidentify minoritized children as disabled. Finally, a key tenet of DisCrit is its commitment to foregrounding the voices and experiences of marginalized communities making it an ideal framework for this study with its focus on the perspectives of minoritized students and their families navigating special education.

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Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study exploring the experiences of minoritized students and their families as they navigated special education placement under high-incidence disability classifications. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to answer the following research question: What are the self-reported lived experiences of minoritized middle school students receiving special education services under the high-incidence classifications within an urban school district? A DisCrit lens further informed all aspects of the research process by centering the impact of student and families' intersecting marginalized identities on their experiences within special education systems. Blending thematic analysis and DisCrit allowed for deep exploration of the invisible workings of racism and ableism in schools that diminish minoritized students' access to equitable learning conditions.

Participants and Context

Participants were recruited from a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade charter school in New York City. I have a long history at this school and previously worked there for fourteen years as a special education teacher, reading specialist, and administrator. At this school, 62% of students identified as Black, 35% as Latinx, and 1% as Asian. Approximately 26% of students were identified as having disabilities and were receiving special education. The school district had a long history of overrepresentation of Black and Latinx students in special education (Fancsali, 2019). Eight middle school students receiving special education under one of the high-incidence disability classifications accepted the invitation to participate in this study including seven boys and one girl. While research indicates minoritized girls are overrepresented in special education (Annamma et al., 2019), Black and Latinx boys make up a larger number of special education students (Ford et al., 2023) and this trend was reflected in the sample of participants for this study. Since children classified with disabilities are considered a twice vulnerable population, this study required a lengthy IRB approval process. In addition to parent/guardian informed consent, I spoke to each student individually using age-appropriate language to explain the research procedures. I repeated throughout this conversation that participation was entirely voluntary, and students would face no consequences for choosing not to participate and that they could end any interviews or leave the project at any time. After this conversation, students decided whether to sign the student assent form. Table 1 provides additional demographic information on student participants who are the focus of this paper.

Data collection occurred between May and December 2021. Students returned to in-person instruction in September 2021 after relying on remote learning during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. During this time, the school faced severe staffing shortages impacting its ability to consistently provide students with their mandated special education services including Integrated Co-teaching (ICT) and small group pull-out and push-in supports. Related services were also impacted resulting in students experiencing interruptions to their occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and speech therapy services.

Research Procedures and Data Sources

One-one Student Interviews

In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with each student between May 2021 and December 2021. A semi-structured questioning format ensured coverage of topics needed to answer the research question while creating space for exploration of ideas that surfaced naturally during the interview process. Questions encouraged student reflection on past and current experiences in school including different types of special education support available to them. Students were also asked to describe relationships with their peers, teachers, and to discuss their opportunities to participate in their own educational decision-making.

Follow-up interviews were scheduled with each student several weeks after initial interviews. Questions for second interviews were individually tailored to each student based on their responses from initial interviews. The goal of follow-up interviews was to focus on the ideas and concepts most important to each student in an effort to deeply understand their experiences in special education. All interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Review of Student Records

Among other important information, the IEP includes narrative description of students' present levels of performance across content areas, documents progress toward meeting individualized learning goals, and outlines which mandated ser-

Table 1. **Student demographic information.**

Student	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Grade	Disability classification	IEP program recommendations
Elijah	15	black	male	8	SLI	ICT SETSS (ELA) speech-language therapy
Malachi	13	black	male	7	SLI	ICT SETSS (ELA and math) speech-language therapy
Jason	12	black	male	6	SLI	ICT speech-language therapy OT
Arissa	11	Dominican	female	6	SLI	ICT SETSS (ELA and math) speech-language therapy
Robby	13	Puerto Rican	male	8	SLI	ICT SETSS (ELA) speech-language therapy
Gabriel	13	Puerto Rican	male	7	ED	ICT counseling OT behavior support para
Ryan	14	black	male	7	ED	ICT counseling speech-language therapy
Antonio	12	Dominican	male	6	SLI	ICT speech OT PT

Note: All names are pseudonyms. IEP, Individualized Education Plan; SLI, speech or language impairment; ICT, integrated co-teaching; SETSS, special education teacher support services; ELA, english language arts; ED, emotional disturbance; OT, occupational therapy; PT, physical therapy.

vices each student must receive. Given the IEP is a robust source of information for students with disabilities, IEPs for each participant were collected and reviewed. Report cards for each student were also analyzed as another data point to build a fuller picture of student's current levels of academic performance. Requests for access to IEPs and report cards were included in informed consent documents and families were asked to provide the researcher with this information.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to identify and organize patterns across the dataset into themes that addressed the research question. To familiarize myself with the data, I transcribed all interview recordings verbatim. I then read and reread transcripts taking notes and memo writing to deepen my understanding of the corpus of data. Next, I completed initial coding for the dataset using In Vivo codes to foreground student voices and process codes to identify student actions. Followed initial coding, I engaged in focused coding, recoding initial codes, to determine which best described the dataset. I used a recursive process where codes were revisited and compared to other codes. I used analytic memos to further reflect and understand the ways my experiences as a special education teacher influenced how I made sense of the data. The resulting 34 focused codes were further refined and analyzed deductively to identify four overarching themes that answered the research question. Analysis was further informed by viewing the data through a DisCrit lens throughout the process. In memos, I considered how students' self-reported experienced were shaped by their intersecting marginalized identities. In other words, I reflected on how students' everyday experiences in special education were impacted by their positioning as racialized, disabled students attending an under-resourced, urban school.

Researcher Positionality

I am a white and Southwest Asian North African (SWANA) cisgender woman with invisible disabilities. While my disabilities have been present since childhood, given my ability to approximate "normal" I was never classified as a special

education student. I believe my proximity to whiteness also meant I was presumed competent in ways not accessible to other minoritized students. Immersed in deficit-oriented and medicalized conceptualizations of disability in society and my schooling, this was the only way I could think about difference into early adulthood when I began teaching special education in New York City. Admittedly, I participated fully in this inequitable system and helped sort, classify, and other multiply marginalized students. Exposure to disability studies in education (DSE) allowed me to understand my complicity in reproducing ableism and racism in my role as special educator. I am now committed to interrupting systems harmful to multiply marginalized students by foregrounding their stories, experiences, and perspectives.

Trustworthiness

Data were triangulated to bolster the trustworthiness of this study. All student participants were interviewed twice. This allowed for reflection on their responses and the opportunity to develop individualized follow-up questions to deeply investigate their experiences. Also, multiple data sources were used including students' IEPs and report cards to make connections across data and to strengthen conclusions made.

Findings

Qualitative thematic analysis resulted in four overall themes describing students' self-reported experiences in special education: (1) student's lack of awareness of their special education status, (2) student perceptions of special education services, (3) challenging academic experiences in middle school despite special education classification, and (4) minimal opportunities for students to express opinions about their schooling. All names used throughout this paper are pseudonyms.

Lacking Awareness of Special Education Status

Only one of the eight participants was aware he had an IEP and was receiving special education services. This lack of awareness of their own special education status persisted despite all students having been classified as disabled by the time they reached second grade. One student, eighth grader Robby, was initially classified in preschool and was not aware of his status as a student with a disability.

Fifteen-year-old Elijah, who was repeating the eighth grade, was the only student aware of his special education placement. He recalled being tested for special education when he moved into the district from out of state the previous year. Despite his awareness of his IEP, Elijah's responses indicated few opportunities to discuss his special education classification with his teachers, "I don't even know if they know about it to be honest…no one really brought it up or said anything." When asked how the testing went Elijah explained, "I never figured it out, I never really asked…you know, I just never asked." As I learned more about Elijah, it was clear he enjoyed close and supportive relationships with his family; however, special education was not a topic he discussed at home either, "I don't even think, to be honest, I don't even think my brother or my sister even knows about my IEP or anything. Um, my mom treats me the same." This last comment, about his mother not treating him differently because he was in special education, hints at internalized deficit views of disability.

When asked to define special education, Elijah's younger brother Malachi, a seventh grader responded, "Is it for like people who have um…disabilities?" Malachi had some awareness of special education as a support for students with disabilities but was not aware of his classification as a student with SLI even though he had been receiving special education services since elementary school. I asked Malachi if he remembered receiving help from special education teachers in his classes. Malachi responded, "No, not special ed teachers. Like certain teachers helped people with certain topics." Given Malachi was a student with an IEP mandate of small group special education services, it is likely this was a special education support.

Student's lack of knowledge about their special education classifications caused confusion. Seventh grader Gabriel, who did not know what an IEP was or that he had one, had questions about the education he was receiving asking at one point, "Why am I doing occupational therapy? It's been happening for a long time." Another student, sixth grader Arissa, could not explain why she was attending speech therapy sessions.

Application of a DisCrit lens to this finding exposes how racialized students became disabled, without their knowledge, by racist and ableist practices embedded within special education policies. Systematized power imbalances meant that

even as students grew older, they were blocked from accessing knowledge that would have allowed them to advocate for themselves as learners. A system with the power to other students for the entireties of their academic careers without ever discussing or sharing any information with them about their situations, all while remaining in compliance with the law, is unjust.

Positive Experiences with Special Education Services

While not aware of why they were receiving these supports, most participants had strong opinions about their special education services. Arissa described speech as, “Fun cause she pulls me and my friend when we have specials cause my friend goes to speech too…We do games, like vocabulary games then at the end we can play an iPad game.” She further explained how the work she did in speech therapy supported her throughout the rest of the school day. Speech sessions were a “brain break” that helped Arissa “feel more focused.”

Robby shared positive perspectives of speech therapy explaining that, “The closest teacher I know is Ms. R. She really knows me since I was in third grade. She was actually one of the persons that helped me with my reading the most, big time.” Robby made a strong connection between his improved reading level and the support he received in speech therapy even saying, “I advise everybody to do it.”

Robby’s responses indicated the positive relationship he had with Ms. R, his speech therapist, was an important factor in the experiences he had in the therapy room. He described a trusting relationship and consistent routine. For example, Robby shared, “After all the hard work, you always get to play a game…sometimes she won’t be able to allow you to play a game that day, but the next time she sees you she always makes up that game.”

Another student, Ryan explained that in elementary school, “I used to get into a lot of trouble. A lot of trouble like I used to get suspended.” Now in seventh grade, Ryan described himself as “a person that is careful about my actions, I don’t want to do something bad.” Ryan shared that counseling, where he worked both individually and in small groups with the school social worker, was a place where he received support that helped him stay on track, “I get to tell them my problems, things I’d like to work on with other people.”

Gabriel, valued his mandated counseling sessions explaining that the school social worker “teaches me different ways so I can stay calm.” Gabriel was classified with an ED and was assigned a behavioral support paraprofessional for half of the school day. At the time of data collection, he had already served five days of out of school suspension. Gabriel had developed a positive relationship with his para and shared that “she always helps me with my work.” He also described a recent situation where he had been accused by other students of a serious incident of harassing a classmate. Gabriel had not engaged in the behavior he was accused of and credited his para for making sure his version of events was heard by teachers. He explained, “she’s always there to back me up…Like if people try to blame me for something, she already knows the truth.”

Frustration with Special Education Services

Not all participants held positive views of the services they were receiving. Sixth grader Jason, who had been receiving speech therapy since first grade expressed strong feelings about not wanting to continue services, “I’ve been doing it for a while now and I certainly don’t think I need it now. Yeah, and it kind of makes me feel, it kind of makes me think that I’m a baby cause I’m still doing that.” While he recognized speech had been helpful when he was younger, Jason no longer saw the benefits of this support, “I still do the same anyway even with the help, I still do the same, I’m you know, getting good.” Jason resented what he perceived as unnecessary disruptions to his school day:

It’s just kind of gets annoying. Like having to be pulled like when I’m doing something with my class if it’s something fun, right, it’s a lot because when I want to do something fun I get pulled and then as soon as I go back I miss it.

These feelings also extended to his mandated OT sessions, “I mean, I still feel like I shouldn’t have to do this anymore cause it gets tiring.” Jason even had suggestions for how to resolve his ongoing related services issues:

Like extra classes, you know like the speech, have them take a test like a writing test and if they score something that they don’t have to take the class anymore but if they fail they do it for a few more months.

Notably, a key purpose of annual IEP meetings is to adjust special education supports based on student needs. Jason,

did not participate in his own IEP meetings and thus did not have the opportunity to share his thoughts about his speech and OT or influence decision-making about his services.

Sixth grader, Antonio, shared similar frustrations related to attending speech therapy sessions, "I mean to be honest, it really doesn't even help me." Like Jason, he found speech more helpful in earlier grades, "We started learning letters and stuff so when you go to speech they just give you that extra help. Now, it's like no use at this point." Antonio's perceptions that he no longer needed special education supports extended to OT, "I don't want to go to OT anymore cause I feel like I already know how to write on the lines and all that stuff." He found that OT sessions overemphasized what Antonio believed to be minor points related to handwriting, "They show straight lines and say you have to go under the line or something. Like nobody does that anymore." While Antonio took a more pragmatic approach to being pulled from class for services, he made it clear that he didn't think these sessions were a good use of his time in school, "If we're doing something fun at the time I get picked up I get mad. If it's during a boring time at least I'm out of the classroom."

Traditionally, student perspectives of what matters in special education have not been acknowledged in the research. Instead, special education success or failure is measured using compliance data and test scores. A DisCrit-informed approach interrupts the status quo by defining special education success in terms of student experiences. Findings indicated the importance of building relationships with students and listening to their concerns when they found services unhelpful.

Challenging Middle School Experiences

Student interviews and review of report card data indicated nearly all participants were experiencing academic difficulty in middle school despite the special education services they were receiving . Report cards for the 2020-2021 school year revealed six out of eight participants were being failed in either english language arts (ELA) or math. Three students were being failed in both core classes. In describing his eighth grade workload Elijah stated, "Oh, it's too much work, they give too much work. Too much work. A lot of students said that too." He also discussed the emphasis the school placed on testing:

Too much tests like right now our teachers are going to make us do testing and we're going to do this Interim Assessment tomorrow. She gives us a whole bunch of tests every day, just straight tests. It's kind of weird, it's kind of messed up.

Robby also shared challenges related to testing stating that, "The first text I read made no sense to me whatsoever." Robby had a B average in ELA; however, his responses revealed that his grades came at a great cost to him. When asked what he wished his teachers knew about him he responded, "How hard I work every day and how hard it is. How hard it is to be me." Speaking to his teachers Robby was emphatic:

Y'all need to be less strict with children. Children have their limits too, not just y'all…Dial it back a lot, y'all adding a lot. Give us less work for winter breaks! A few days is fine, I just don't want to read the whole time.

Some students receiving failing grades in middle school reported positive experiences as elementary students. Reflecting on his elementary years Elijah shared, "Elementary was easy…I was a good student." Malachi shared that he was most proud of his performance in elementary school, "Elementary school it was kind of the best I had because it was easy, it wasn't at all frustrating." As an elementary student, Malachi "usually got B, C, or As." Sharing that in middle school, "I got some Fs but not that many."

Jason, who was having difficulty with math in sixth grade, traced these challenges back to elementary school, "Even though I was in kindergarten I was having problems with addition and time cards." However, strong positive relationships with his teachers supported him through these challenges:

What they would do is like if we had like failed on something they would give us hope, right. They would make us feel better like if we didn't do good on something…they would comfort us. And you know they used to make learning really fun.

Jason further described his kindergarten teachers as being "like a parent." In sharing about his current teachers in sixth grade, Jason explained, "Some of the teachers I don't really get along with cause sometimes they yell…it makes me feel a little anxious because when I get yelled at I think I'm directly getting yelled at when I'm not." Given these feelings of anxiety, Jason was reluctant to ask for help in math class and at the time of this interview was receiving a failing grade.

DisCrit rejects locating blame for academic difficulty in individual students and demands educators consider the larger classroom, school, and societal contexts. A DisCrit-informed analysis of the data revealed the school's shift to a hyperfocus on preparing students for high-stakes testing during middle school. When students were unable to perform well on these exams, they were found deficient and were assigned failing grades and subject to grade level retention. Special education status did not shield students from these consequences even when they were not receiving all mandated services. The school remained either unaware of or indifferent to the individual costs of this academic stress on students and their families.

Not Having a Seat at the Table

Finally, and unsurprisingly, the data revealed student's limited opportunities to participate in educational decision making. Jason's frustrations about having to attend related services he didn't find helpful were compounded because he didn't feel he had much say in his schooling, "Sometimes when I want to say something and I find something in the school unfair, I can't usually say anything cause they don't want to listen."

Antonio also felt that he didn't have a say, "I wish the teachers knew that I have an

opinion…they just act like I'm a five-year-old just sitting there doing nothing, but I have an opinion too." Speaking to his teachers, Antonio shared, "Students are ready to speak up cause most decisions are mostly by the school." When asked if he felt he had a say, Ryan replied, "Nah, I just really follow what the teacher says."

Arissa did feel that she had a say in her education explaining, "Sometimes there's things that I don't enjoy, like maybe music. So, I ask the teacher if I can switch the cocurriculars so she put me in gym." When asked if there were other instances where she had a say in her schooling, Arissa responded, "not really." It's telling that Arissa's perceived involvement didn't extend past a relatively low-stakes decision like selecting a preferred cocurricular class. Similarly, Gabriel nodded emphatically when asked if he got to make decisions about school but could not give an example of a time he influenced a decision about his own education.

Finally, Elijah was aware that he could participate in IEP meetings to share his opinions stating, "If you don't want this you can just ask them to take it off your IEP" but he had only ever attended one IEP meeting in elementary school. Here there was a disconnect between what he knew was possible and the reality of the situation he was in where he didn't have a seat at the table. Viewed through a DisCrit lens, students were denied opportunities to practice self-advocacy and were pushed further into the margins.

Discussion and Implications

I used a DisCrit lens to investigate the lived experiences of students with intersecting marginalized identities as they negotiated ableist and racist educational systems. A qualitative thematic approach further facilitated in-depth understanding of the impact inequitable educational systems, including special education, on individual student's school trajectories and experiences. This work helps demonstrate why additional research foregrounding the perspectives of minoritized students is warranted as we have much to learn from the knowledge these students generated.

Encouraging Student Agency

Seven of the eight participants in this study made it all the way to middle school without knowing they were identified as students with disabilities. Subsequently, they had no idea about the information in their IEPs and no role in developing these consequential documents. Researchers, including Ryan & Deci (2020), have long discussed the importance of fostering students' sense of self-determination. I argue this idea must be extended to students labeled as disabled and placed in special education. According to the IDEA, students aged fourteen and up are entitled to attend their own IEP meetings. They should know why they are classified as disabled and be aware of the recommended programs and services outlined on the IEP. As evidenced by the responses of participants in this study, young people have much to say about their schooling and what they need to learn best. Students younger than 14 should be invited to IEP meetings whenever advisable and may benefit from informal conversations with teachers and families about their special education services. Further, including students in IEP development answers whole schooling's call to prepare students to become engaged citizens by empowering them to make decisions about their own educations.

Building Positive Relationships with Students

Findings of this study align with previous research indicating the importance of teacher-student relationships on student engagement (Roorda et al., 2017). Findings also revealed the impact provider-student relationships had on student's perceptions of the helpfulness of the special education services they were receiving. Robby, who built a positive, long-term relationship with his speech therapist, Ms. R., enjoyed attending sessions and found these services beneficial both academically, and socially. Speech therapy helped Robby improve his literacy skills and Ms. R's consistency and reliability served as an anchor for Robby during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of great uncertainty. Similarly, Arissa's responses revealed that Ms. R's room was a place where she felt safe and comfortable. She enjoyed her time with Ms. R and found that this "brain break" sustained her through the rest of her school day.

In contrast, Jason and Gabriel struggled to see the benefit of the speech and OT services they received. This may have been partially due to frequent staffing changes and obstacles to developing relationships with new providers during remote instruction. Students in this study appeared to benefit greatly opportunities to develop consistent, trusting relationships with teachers and providers they came to rely upon. Schools are encouraged to consider factors contributing to high rates of teacher and related-service provider attrition and take steps to address these areas of weakness.

Interrogating the Unfulfilled Promises of Special Education

Transitioning from elementary to middle school, where students take on more responsibility for their learning and face challenging social situations is often a difficult time (Duchesne et al., 2012). For several participants in this study, their status as special education students did little to ameliorate the academic and social challenges they experienced in middle school, including four students who were retained. Prior research indicates students from minoritized backgrounds receive fewer, often inferior special education supports than white peers with the same disability classifications (Artiles et al., 2010) and are resegregated using restrictive class placements in special education (Blanchett et al., 2005) Findings of this study, where students either did not receive all their services, or where services were fragmented, strengthen this argument. Application of a DisCrit lens highlighted how these multiply-marginalized students, Black and Latinx students classified with high-incidence disabilities, and attending an urban school, were vulnerable to not benefitting from their special education designations.

One way to maximize benefits of special education, including related services, is to shift away from pull-out models to keeping students in the general education classroom while they receive the additional instruction they need. All eight students reported being pulled out of their general education lessons and receiving related services in separate locations. Pull-out models like this persist despite research indicating students are best served by inclusive practices where they remain in general education spaces with their peers (Cosier et al., 2013). While there may be occasions when a teacher or therapist decides specific skills may be best addressed in a separate space, increasing the amount of learning time in general education facilitates application of important skills in the classroom.

More time in the general education classroom will only help students if we reimagine this space as a place of inclusivity where the goal is to meet the needs of all learners. General education can draw upon the principles of Universal Design for Learning (Meyer et al., 2014) to create environments where the needs of all students are considered from the beginning of curriculum planning. This moves towards adopting the recommendation made by Harry et al. (2005), "At least for children with high-incidence learning and behavior difficulties; special education should be reconceptualized as a set of services that are available to children who need them, without the need for a disability label" (p. 185). This reconceptualization aligns with the principles of whole schooling which rejects segregation and recognizes the often untapped potential of special education to strengthen general education and expand its capacity as a place of inclusivity where students of varying abilities learn together.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, my previous long tenure as part of the school community meant I developed many close relationships with students and families and was well known at the school. It is likely this influenced participants' responses either by encouraging or discouraging candor. Next, the school district involved segregates students whose disabilities are deemed too severe to attend what are referred to as "community" schools. Instead, these students attend special education only schools within the district. Students with ID classifications are unlikely to attend "community"

schools, constraining the potential sample of participants for this study. A final limitation is that inter-coder reliability was not employed during data analysis for this paper.

Availability of Data and Materials

This manuscript is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, which is available in CUNY Academic Works database. The manuscript has been substantially revised and reformatted for journal publication, in accordance with the journal's requirements. Participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Author Contributions

All research, analysis, and writing was conducted by the author AEH. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the City University of New York (IRB File #2019-1107).

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Conflict of Interest

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