Lifting the Voices of Black Students Labeled With Emotional Disturbance: Calling All Special Education Researchers

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Abstract

Ill-defined behaviors related to emotional disturbance (ED) classification and a lack of cultural competence have contributed to the over-representation of Black children in special education. Several meta-analyses and systematic reviews of the literature have been conducted to examine the topic of over-representation, but to date, there remains debate surrounding this issue. At the same time, and in recognition of the fact that statistical analyses from quantitative research do not lend voice to the participants in research studies, there is a dearth of qualitative research studies focused on Black students eligible for special education under an ED label where the researchers spoke to the students themselves, rather than asking others (e.g., teachers, parents) about them. In the current forum paper, we call attention to this issue by reviewing the existing studies where researchers have spoken to Black students with ED about their school experience, and we place a call to action before the field of special education researchers.

Keywords

differences, cultural, emotional disturbance, disorders/disabilities, disproportionate representation, qualitative methods

Federal legislation suggests special education services are designed—and deemed necessary—to help students with disabilities access the accommodations and supports they need to achieve academic success and educational equity in schools across the United States (Gatlin & Wilson, 2016). In practice, many students have experienced benefits (e.g., improved academic achievement, high school graduation, social-emotional development) from specialized education services (Kauffman et al., 2017). At the same time, the low expectations that often accompany come along with the federally required labels (e.g., learning disability, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance [ED]) to make students eligible for special education have also harmed students' educational experiences (Gold & Richards, 2012; Shifter, 2013). Students with disabilities are often viewed with pity rather than promise, which promotes discrimination in the form of ableism (i.e., a preference for able-bodied people; Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Black students with disabilities are a twice-marginalized and discriminated-against group (Gatlin & Wilson, 2016), as they are among the most over-represented demographic in special education (McKenna, 2013; Parrish, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Disproportionality in Special Education

The most recent report to the U.S. Congress on the implementation of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) indicated Black students ages 6 to 21 were more likely than their non-Black peers to receive services across almost all special education categories, except those related to visual, hearing, and speech impairments (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Students with medically diagnosed disabilities—or "hard disabilities" (e.g., hearing and visual impairments)—are less likely to be misidentified than students being served under IDEA for disabilities with subjective classification systems—or "soft disabilities"—such as ED (Garwood & Adamson, 2022; Garwood & Moore, 2021; Harry & Klinger, 2014; Whitford & Carrero, 2019).

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) defines ED as: "A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

> (a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

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(b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory inter-personal relationships with peers and teachers.
(c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
(d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
(e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance." The definition has been criticized as vague and inaccurate for decades (see Forness & Knitzer, 1992; Wery & Cullinan, 2013).

Misidentification of students—specifically, disproportionate over-representation of Black students identified and served in special education for ED—is historically and persistently problematic (e.g., Bal et al., 2019; Council for Children With Behavioral Disorders, 2013; Dunn, 1968; Oswald et al., 1999; Waitoller et al., 2010; Whitford & Carrero, 2019). Over-representation of Black students in special education for ED means the percentage of Black students in this category is greater than their overall percentage in the school population (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). For example, nearly 20 years ago, Black students made up 17% of the public-school population, but they represented 27% of those receiving services with an ED label (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Today, Black students are two-to-three times more likely to receive a label of ED than their White counterparts (Bal et al., 2019; McKenna, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2021) and they are disproportionately placed in restrictive educational environments (e.g., self-contained classrooms) and under-represented in inclusive environments (Skiba et al., 2006).

Special education is designed to help students. Why, then, would a group's over-representation in special education under the category of ED be problematic? Simply put, over-representation of an entire group denotes and perpetuates the notion that there is something inherently defective within this group. Moreover, over-representation assumes the practice of misidentification is occurring, either for that population and category or elsewhere within close proximity (i.e., under-identification of other groups for the same category or over-identification of the group that is over-represented in the category). Within the context of over-representation of Black students labeled ED, the stigma associated with behavioral health concerns (Corrigan & Penn, 1999; Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013) compounds, confirms, and perpetuates negative and unequivocally false stereotypes that have plagued Black people in America and have proved quite costly for all Americans (Gold & Richards, 2012; Harry et al., 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Whitford & Carrero, 2019; World Health Organization,

2013, 2021). Black children already face unfair and unfounded assumptions about their competencies, maturity levels, and humanness from adults of all races (Epstein et al., 2017; Ford et al., 2020; Goff et al., 2014). Moreover, the special education label of ED perpetuates negative stereotypes, systemic oppression, and deficit models of education (Krämer & Zimmermann, 2021; Lambert et al., 2022) and children who are identified as ED already face negative attitudes from teachers, administrators, and peers (Gidlund, 2018; de Swart et al., 2021). Therefore, a Black student labeled as having ED has multiple stereotypes to overcome in order to access appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

Many educational professionals and even scholars purport that special education is simply good education (Kauffman et al., 2018). Although specially designed instruction—the actual spirit of special education—should result in improved outcomes, special education is often conceptualized as a placement, rather than a service or specialized programming. Consequently, students who are *mislabeled* with ED—that is, those who do not meet the criteria for ED and/or who do not demonstrate a need for specially designed instruction—are likely to be subjected to the lowered academic and behavioral expectations that are placed on all students with ED (Fish, 2019; Gilmour et al., 2019; Peterson, 2010). Black children with ED are disproportionately placed in more restrictive educational settings than their White counterparts with ED (Albrecht et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Using placement decisions to exclude and segregate Black children from inclusive educational settings has been a part of the American history of education for more than 50 years. For example, in California in 1965, special education as a system was accused of being cover for the continued segregation of Black students in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case in 1954 (Prasse & Reschly, 1986). The pattern of over-identification and disproportionate restrictions is a school-based example of policing Black children and a precursor to the policing that many of them will encounter through adulthood (Jones-Brown & Williams, 2021). Some scholars contend that disproportionate exclusionary discipline, identification of ED, and restrictive placements are institutional mechanisms that socialize Black children for prison and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Cramer et al., 2014; Whitford & Carrero, 2019). Smith (2003) claims that for many Black students, special education does not provide more opportunities; rather, it presents "trapdoors sending them willy-nilly to war, to jail, to lives of unfulfilled promises" (p. 1). More than just hyperbolic conjecture, there are data to support such claims. More than 50% of Black students receiving services under a label of ED dropout of school, and of those students, 73% are arrested within 5 years of dropout (McKenna, 2013).

Black Students and the Emotional Disturbance Label

Ill-defined behaviors related to ED classification and a lack of cultural competence have contributed to the over-representation of Black children in special education (Kearns et al., 2005; Lambert et al., 2022; Olmeda & Kauffman, 2003; Serpell et al., 2009). For example, one study of teachers viewing videos of Black students' and White students' walking styles found teachers rated students engaged in culture-related movement as more likely in need of special education related to behavior (Neal et al., 2003). Epstein and colleagues (2017) surveyed adults of all races and found that adults from all racial and ethnic backgrounds believe Black girls—as young as 5 years—are more culpable for their behaviors, more "adult-like," and less innocent than their same-age, White peer counterparts. Deficit models can take place wherein Black students are seen as inferior because their culture does not match that of the so-called dominant culture in American society (Harry & Anderson, 1995; Hytten & Adkins, 2001; McCray et al., 2003; O'Quin, 2021). Olmeda and Kauffman (2003) summarized cultural differences between Black and White students depicted in the literature while cautioning about any intention to stereotype as these characteristics speak to broader comparisons and are not made at the individual level. Compared with White students, Black students are (a) more likely to question authority because leadership is based on the power of persuasion, (b) less egocentric and more sociocentric, (c) more loyal to their immediate and extended family, (d) more likely to express themselves in physical movements, (e) less likely to maintain eye contact, and (f) more likely to manifest a confrontational and affective form of verbal expression.

In addition to cultural incongruence between Black students and a mostly White, female teaching force (Warren, 2018), there are many other reasons available to explain the issue of over-representation for special education services (e.g., socioeconomic factors, racism, vague definitions in special education law, lack of research into this area; McKenna, 2013). Some scholars posit poverty or socioeconomic status as a more reliable variable than race/ethnicity in quantitative analyses to predict special education identification rates; however, this is not an agreed upon assertion or finding in the disproportionality research (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Hibel et al., 2010; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Skiba et al., 2005). Researchers have explored political affiliation at the state level to try and explain disproportionate identification rates and found a significant and negative correlation between Black students' identification for ED and levels of conservatism in a state (see Wiley et al., 2013). Others have even made the claim that Black students are under-represented in special education, suggesting educational inequities exist in the opposite direction (e.g., Black

students are being denied the access to special education that could help them do better in schools; Morgan et al., 2017). In their synthesis of 22 studies examining over-representation of Black children in special education, Morgan and colleagues found only 1 of 48 coefficient estimates indicated significant over-representation related to race or ethnicity. However, in a follow-up study, Farkas and colleagues (2020) determined that when there was non-White student over-representation in special education, it was due to district-level responses to racial achievement gaps. Claims about the under-representation of non-White students in special education have received considerable resistance and criticism (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Fish, 2019; Ford & Russo, 2016; Whitford & Carrero, 2019).

Qualitative Studies Focused on Black Students With ED

Different epistemological and ontological views inform research on disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2021). One could debate issues of over- or under-representation in special education and cite multiple studies on either side to support their position (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). However, the reality that schools can be hostile environments for Black students remains and there needs to be a deeper examination of how the field may better meet the needs of Black children (Love, 2014). Although studies employing statistical analyses of disproportionality are many (Ahram et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2017), numerical data alone are not enough to change the educational landscape. Quantitative methods can tell us what relationships exist between variables, but they are unable to fully explain why or how those relationships exist (Lakshman et al., 2000). Qualitative methods, however, allow for a deeper examination of disproportionality issues on the ground. Instead of relying solely on sophisticated statistical models, it would also be useful to speak directly with the Black students who are being described as disproportionately eligible for special education related to ED. Too often, we as a field spend the majority of our time talking *about* Black students with ED (e.g., reasons for referral, cultural mismatch between teacher and student, exclusionary discipline), rather than talking *to* these students. Omitting, disregarding, or minimizing the voice of the population our research seeks to examine and support may result in unknowingly limiting our understanding, perpetuating deficit narratives, and endorsing oppressive policies (Charlton, 1998; Richards & Clark, 2018)

To confirm the issue of an over-reliance on quantitative studies in special education research, we sought to identify qualitative research studies focused on Black students eligible for special education under an ED label where the researchers spoke to the students themselves, rather than

asking others (e.g., teachers, parents) about them. Furthermore, we were interested in the quality of the existing qualitative research. In a time when quantitative studies are rigorously evaluated to determine whether they meet the threshold standards by agencies like the What Works Clearinghouse and the Council for Exceptional Children, it seems prudent to provide the same attention to research using qualitative methods (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Therefore, we explored the following areas in the extant literature: (a) How many studies are available in the extant literature where the researchers used qualitative methods to speak directly with Black students labeled with ED and what are the demographic characteristics of the student participants in the studies? (b) What research questions were included in the available studies and what major conclusions were reached by the respective authors of the studies? (c) What has been the quality of the research conducted to date?

Identifying the Research Base

First, a statement on positionality is necessary. The two authors of this study are White (one female and one male). Both are associate professors of special education (at separate universities in different states) who train pre-and in-service special education teachers and conduct research related to youth with ED. Furthermore, lest there be an assumption of bias toward one methodology over another, both authors are more experienced in quantitative research than qualitative inquiry (though both have published qualitative research studies). Neither of the current authors was an author on any of the qualitative research studies discussed in this forum paper. Finally, both authors have published systematic reviews of the literature in the ED field. Because of this experience, we utilized best practices in systematic reviews to identify all possible studies in the extant literature. However, we acknowledge that because our intention was to put forth a forum article rather than a traditional review of the literature, our methods stopped short of what would typically be expected according to Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) standards.

We conducted an electronic search for peer-reviewed journal articles in *ERIC, Proquest Central Education Database, PsycInfo*, and *Sociology Database* using the following search terms: (Black, OR African American) AND (student) AND (emotional disturbance, OR emotional and behavioral disorder, OR "EBD," OR behavior disorder) AND (qualitative, OR focus group, OR interview). We set no parameters on the date of publication. Initial search engine return indicated 1,097 articles for possible inclusion. Each title and abstract were screened for the following inclusion criteria: (a) the article reports results of a qualitative study focused on Black students with ED in the United States, (b) the experiences of students with ED are studied through direct interaction with them by the research team and the students' personal views are the focus of the study; and (c) the study was published in English. Dissertations were excluded because our intent was to identify studies that may have informed the field and, unlike peer-reviewed journal articles that appeal to a large readership, dissertations are typically read by few people beyond the author and their committee. Two researchers independently screened the studies based on these criteria and reliability was 100%. Figure 1 details the remainder of our search procedures and results.

Examining the Studies

With just three articles meeting all of our inclusion criteria, we coded for the following descriptive/demographic data in each study: sample size, gender, age/grade, disability information, educational setting, and research questions. The first author examined each article and compiled data for all three studies into a table. The second author then checked all data for accuracy and reliability was 100%. Next, we coded for the major conclusions in each article. The second author compiled a descriptive summary of conclusions into a table and the first author reviewed the data for accuracy. Reliability was 100%.

Core quality indicators for special education research using qualitative methods in special education were first established by Brantlinger et al. (2005) and later expanded upon by Trainor and Graue (2014). Research studies using interview/focus group methods were coded for five indicators and studies using observation were coded for six indicators. Additionally, studies were coded for three indicators related to theory, transparency, and reflexivity, and for five indicators related to data analysis. No numerical coding system for scoring research studies for quality is provided by Brantlinger et al. (2005) or by Trainor and Graue (2014). We decided to use a three-point scale to assess each study, rather than a dichotomous coding scheme that may have reduced the ability to capture nuanced differences in study reporting quality. A code of *Yes/Met* was scored as 2. A code of *Somewhat, with Key Information Missing* was scored as 1. A code of *Not Addressed* was scored as 0. The first and second authors then scored each study using these procedures and then compared data for reliability purposes. Overall reliability across all categories was 92.6%. The discrepancies that did exist were easily resolved through a brief discussion between the two coders.

Three Studies Using Qualitative Methods to Talk to Students With ED

Our efforts indicate there are only three studies in the entire extant literature where researchers have sought to gather

Electronic Search Results = 1,097 peer-reviewed journals articles

Articles Excluded = 1,075 for the following reasons…
- Not relevant to students identified with ED (n = 911)
- Did not use qualitative methods (n = 95)
- Not reports of qualitative research (n = 69)
- Teacher discussing students with ED with no student voice (n = 17)
- Focus on family members of students with ED (n = 2)

Electronic Result = 3 eligible studies

Hand Search in Relevant Journals:
- Behavioral Disorders
- Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders
- Education and Treatment of Children
- Multiple Voices of Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners
- Remedial and Special Education

Hand Result = 0 additional studies

Ancestral Review and Google Scholar Forward Search
- No additional studies in review of reference lists of 3 studies from electronic search
- 51 citations to the 3 articles reviewed for possible studies to be included

Forward and Backward Search Result = 0 additional studies

Final Result = 3 studies identified in the extant literature

Figure 1. Remaining search procedures to identify studies.
Note. ED = emotional disturbance.

the first-person accounts of Black students with ED using qualitative inquiry (see Table 1). These three studies represent a total of just 26 students (*n* = 21 males and *n* = 5 females) in Grades 2 to 12, and the last study was conducted over a decade ago (i.e., Srsic & Rice, 2012). Two studies occurred in public schools within inclusive classrooms (Bacon et al., 2005; Grant & Dieker, 2011), while one study involved participants in a self-contained school (Srsic & Rice, 2012). Interestingly, while this most recent study did include Black female students with ED, Srsic and Rice were not actively seeking to capture experiences within the context of participants' racial identity. Rather, they were interested in female students with ED; the homogeneity of the participants' racial identity was not a result of targeted recruitment to investigate members of a particular racial group—it just so happened that all five participants in the study racially identified as Black. To say that our field has dedicated far less attention to the voices of Black students with ED would be an understatement.

We hesitate to offer themes related to the research questions that guided previous studies or their conclusions, given the small sample size (see Table 1). Two studies were broadly focused on students' relationships with others (Bacon et al., 2005; Srsic & Rice, 2012),

while one study focused on a web-based mentorship model (see Grant & Dieker, 2011). In Bacon et al. (2005), Black/African American male students with/at risk for ED reported they: (a) value teachers who show they care about them by not giving up on them, (b) experience cultural discontinuity between school norms and their values when managing peer conflict, and (c) believe they are treated differently by their teachers because of their label and/or race. Srsic and Rice (2012) examined how female students with emotional/behavioral disorders described their relational experiences within the context of a gender-responsive, all-female support group. Participants indicated having minimal exposure to positive female relationships, and they distanced themselves from other female friends because of negative experiences (e.g., jealousy and competition). Finally, Grant and Dieker (2011) found that their web-based mentoring had some positive outcomes for participants—specifically, participants' openness to discussing personal matters; however, the mentoring had limited impact on attendance, behavior, and achievement. All three of the studies concluded by urging educators to invite Black students with or at risk for ED into supportive spaces to have conversations with educators.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Study Descriptions for the Three Studies Involving Black Children with ED.

Study	N	Gender	Age and/or grade	Disability information	Educational setting	Research questions (verbatim)
Bacon et al. (2005)	19	Male	7.8–15.8 years Grades 2.7–7	Combination of labels including EBD, LD, OHI, and HSR	Full or partially inclusive classrooms in public school	(1) What are the characteristics of good and caring teachers (from AA boys' perspectives)? (2) Do the social expectations of their peer group conflict with schools' norms for appropriate behavior? (3) Do the students perceive that school personnel treat them differently than other students?
Grant and Dieker (2011)	2	Male	16 years Grade 9	ED; both students were reported to have IQs of 66	Inclusive classrooms in public school	(1) What themes emerge from mentoring Black males with ED in high school using a web-based mentoring model?
Srsic and Rice (2012)	5	Female	15–19 years Grades 9–12	EBD	Private, self-contained day school program	(1) How do girls with EBD describe their relational experiences as they participate in a Girls Circle, a gender-responsive, structured, support group curriculum? a. How do girls with EBD perceive the meaning of friendship? b. How do girls with EBD perceive their connectedness to others? c. How do girls with EBD perceive their ability to establish and maintain relationships with others? (2) How do girls with EBD describe themselves as they participate in a Girls Circle?

Note. EBD = emotional/behavioral disorder; LD = learning disability; OHI = other health impairment; HSR = high suspension rate; ED = emotional disturbance.

Table 2. Quality of Qualitative Studies Involving Black Children with ED.

Criteria	Bacon et al. (2005)	Grant and Dieker (2011)	Srsic and Rice (2012)
Interview/focus group studies			
1. Appropriate participants are selected.	2	n/a	2
2. Interview questions are reasonable.	2	n/a	0
3. Adequate mechanisms arc used to record and transcribe interviews.	1	n/a	0
4. Participants are represented sensitively and fairly in the report.	2	n/a	2
5. Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.	0	n/a	0
Observation studies			
6. Appropriate setting(s) and/or people are selected for observation.	n/a	2	2
7. Sufficient time is spent in the field.	n/a	2	2
8. Researcher fits into the site and is unobtrusive.	n/a	2	2
9. Research has minimal impact on setting (except for action research).	n/a	2	2
10. Field notes systematically collected.	n/a	0	1
11. Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.	n/a	2	1
Theory, transparency, and reflexivity			
12. The role of theory is explained in the study.	0	0	2
13. Methodological and interpretive choices explained; credible narrative.	2	1	2
14. Positionality and biases acknowledged and connected to methods.	0	0	1
Data analysis			
15. Results are sorted and coded in a systematic and meaningful way.	2	1	1
16. Sufficient rationale is provided for what was included in the report.	0	1	1
17. Methods used to establish trustworthiness and credibility are clear.	1	2	1
18. Conclusions are substantiated by sufficient evidence and data.	2	2	2
19. Connections are made with related research.	2	1	1

Note. 0 = not/barely addressed; 1 = somewhat, but key information is missing; 2 = met/yes; n/a = not applicable; Items 1 to 11 and 15 to 19 are from Brantlinger et al. (2005). Items 12 to 14 are from Trainor and Graue (2014).

Not only have there been just three studies conducted using qualitative methods to investigate the voices of Black students identified with ED, but collectively they have only been cited a total of 51 times. These findings point to several questions needing further inquiry. Firstly, what would Black students with ED tell us (i.e., scholars, researchers, and professionals who serve and advocate for them) if given the chance? How would their voices contribute to the decades old discussion about their treatment, services, and needs? Secondly, what about students with ED who have other racial and/or cultural identities? Have we been asking our students with ED from all backgrounds about their experiences? For a field that prides itself on student-centered planning, specially or individually designed instruction, and collaboration (Bateman et al., 2015; Friend, 2018; Hallahan et al., 2019), our examination of the existing literature indicates that we are not adhering to these values when examining our field, our main units of interest (i.e., students with disabilities), and its practices.

Finally, our efforts indicate the three studies that do exist were done with varying degrees of quality (based on available standards; see Table 2). Because different qualitative methods were used across the three studies (interviews or observations, or both), we focus on those areas that were

scored across all three studies. The area most in need of improvement appears to be item 14 in Table 2, which focuses on the importance of acknowledging one's biases and positionality in conducting the research. The remaining data in Table 2 provide a clear picture of areas of both strength and weakness in the extant literature.

Call to Action

The purpose of writing this forum paper was to call attention to and explore the degree to which researchers have spoken to Black students with ED about their school experience and, given our results, we now place a call to action before the field of special education researchers. Our purpose was not to finger-wag at our peers; on the contrary, we acknowledge our own responsibility to do better in our research endeavors. Disappointingly, although not completely to our surprise, we were able to identify just three qualitative studies for our purposes. There are a few possible reasons for a lack of student voice in the literature base. One possible reason is our overall lack of published qualitative research in special education research journals (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Another possible reason is the evidence-based practice

(EBP) movement and its insistence that our focus is on building a repository of validated practices to equip practitioners with when they are designing and delivering instruction. Although some researchers of specific disability categories have excelled at establishing a vast repertoire of EBPs (e.g., Steinbrenner et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2014), it has been more challenging to establish these practices for students with ED, likely because of definitional and identification issues (Landrum & Tankersley, 2013).

As our field works to build the EBP repository for students with ED, not only is it important to examine what works, for whom, and under what conditions, but it is equally important to investigate the social validity and cultural responsivity of the practices from the perspective of the student with ED. Federal policy is meant to reflect our collective values and, in accordance with IDEA (2004), schools must ensure that students with disabilities are included in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team, whenever appropriate (§300.321[a][7]). Our profession and our society value the inclusion, participation, and self-determination of students with disabilities (§1400[c][1]). Although we are still learning how to meaningfully include students with disabilities in their IEP team and meetings (Royer, 2017), we advocate for their participation because our community values the input of the student and any opportunities for them to develop and exercise agency.

In the early 1990s, disability researchers were urged to engage in participatory research to co-construct the knowledge base and, perhaps more importantly, include the research priorities identified by people with disabilities (Zarb, 1992). School-based researchers have examined using the participatory culture-specific intervention model—an iterative participatory consultation model that includes stakeholders in the research, implementation, and evaluation of the target program (Brann et al., 2022; Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2016)—included students as co-constructors of knowledge and collaborators in proposed program changes (Harper et al., 2021). To truly adhere to our mores of empowering our students to adopt self-determined behaviors (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007) and to diversify our perspectives and empirical understanding, we would be wise to include the voice of students with ED. Moreover, much of our empirical base has been researched, peer-reviewed, and published from a socially and demographically homogeneous perspective (Banks et al., 2022). And although as research scientists we pride ourselves on operating from a place of objectivity and going through extensive efforts to control for biases, we only need to consult an introductory research methods textbook to be reminded of our vulnerabilities, particularly as educational researchers, to map our own cultures and assumptions onto our inquiry (Milner, 2007). Recognizing the transactional nature of educational research by examining and pursuing our own positionality and its impact on developing and disseminating a nuanced understanding of Black students with ED and their educational experiences is critical to our mission as both researchers and advocates (Gormley, 2005; Milner, 2007; Phillippo & Nolan, 2022). Without this concerted, community effort, our field and empirical base is vulnerable to potentially perpetuating racist ideals (Scheurich & Young, 1997) and promoting a "curriculum of control" within, beyond, and at the schoolhouse doors for students with ED (Knitzer et al., 1990).

Another barrier may also be the unique issues related to conducting research with this population. Although the diversity within the ED category is true, there are several commonalities that exist within the ED population that inhibit "clean" research that withstands the rigorous scrutiny of quality indicators necessary to meet the criteria for being an EBP. The very nature of ED often suggests a less-stable participant group—that is, less-stable attendance and more frequent movement between placements of service delivery because of frequent behavioral concerns (Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2020; USDOE, 2022). Each of these potential barriers exists for all participants with ED, but for Black students with ED, it is possible that historical wounds between Black Americans and the scientific research community (e.g., Tuskegee Experiment; George et al., 2014) may also deter participation.

As our student population continues to rapidly diversify (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Frey, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), and if Black children are going to continue to be over-represented in the ED category, it is the responsibility of the special education research community to apply diverse methodologies that will provide the most impact and knowledge to our field. We must dig deeper—ask old questions in new ways. For example, instead of simply drawing gross generalizations about the disproportionate representation of Black children identified with ED, perhaps a randomized cross-national content analysis of full and individual evaluation plans from districts cited for significant disproportionality and investigating the reported reasons for referrals. Perhaps we interview Black students with ED and ask questions about their educational experiences and then code the data to identify statements of self-determination and causal agency (Shogren et al., 2017). How are the experiences of Black students with ED different than Black students who are not identified with a disability, but who are being educated in similar or demographically matched schools? How, if at all, are the experiences of Black students with ED different than White and Hispanic/Latinx students with ED? How do Black students with ED describe their learning process? When have they contacted success in learning and felt accomplished and capable? How and in what ways do Black students describe their attempts to build and maintain interpersonal

relationships with their peers and teachers? How do their descriptions differ from their peers who are not identified with ED, particularly their Black peers? What is the trust level between Black students with ED and their teachers (both special and general education) and administrators? In what ways, if at all, do Black students with ED and their Black peers without ED differ in their understanding, proficiency, and/or willingness to code switch as a means to access social acceptance from communication partners, particularly when power structures between partners are unequally distributed? How do Black students with ED describe their peer relationships and how different are their descriptions from their peers—those who are racially matched but are not labeled with ED and those who are identified with ED, but who are non-Black? How or in what ways do Black students with ED believe they are having "inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances"? Do they describe themselves as having a "pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression"? If so, to what do they attribute those feelings? With ED having such subjective and power-laden eligibility criteria, obtaining rich descriptions may give our field insight into new ways to approach accurate identification and high-quality education of Black students with ED (and perhaps all students with ED, despite racial identity).

Every research question has an optimal research design and methodology. When seeking to understand nuances and lived experiences of a particular population—particularly a somewhat small population—qualitative research approaches are not only appropriate, but optimal (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Until we dismantle systemic oppressions within our educational system and gain a better understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions, scholars investigating students with ED are encouraged to use and publish diverse research methodologies—particularly qualitative research—to gain a better understanding of the nuances existing within the population of students identified with ED. In sum, we value the efforts and fervor of the EBP movement; we recognize it as necessary, but not sufficient in achieving educational equity for Black students with ED. We, as a field, need to become better acquainted with the values and perspectives of our students to inform the cultural responsivity and social validity of our practices; to promote self-determination and a culture of transactional learning environments.

Finally, this forum paper is a call to promote the voices of our students—particularly the voices of Black students with ED. Black students with ED are perpetually told to "turn down the volume" on both their literal and proverbial voices every day in our schools. If our research—or lack thereof—tells us anything, it is that Black students with ED are robbed of their agency (Bourdieu, 1977; Sullivan, 2001), segregated from peers (Grindal et al., 2019), and

chastised for not "showing up" for academics (Lynn et al., 2010; Rogers & Brooms, 2020). We are special education researchers—let us show humility (Mergen et al., 2021) and value person-centered planning, individualized instruction and supports, and collaboration not just in our policies and practices but also in our science.

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