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Consequential Intersections: Examining Equity Expressions and Experiences Within Special Education Ecosystems

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We employ the metaphor of an educational ecosystem to explain how racial inequity in special education manifests in a midsized urban school district via equity expressions and experiences. We focus on two ecosystems operating at the mesolevel within school districts:1) special education and 2) equity ecosystems. We show how these educational ecosystems converge and diverge when a state education agency (SEA) cites a local education agency (LEA) via federal disability legislation for racial disparities in special education outcomes—commonly referred to as racial disproportionality. Using document analysis and semistructured interview data, we empirically examine how equity and special education ecosystems converge and diverge and discuss the implications for addressing racialized inequities. We highlight that there was limited equity absorption across the two ecosystems and how racism and ableism are implicated in the convergences and divergences between the two systems. We conclude with recommendations for policy and practice.

Keywords: *case studies, document analysis, educational ecosystem, equity, policy, qualitative research, race, social context, special education*

The U.S. Department of Education ("ED") repeatedly reports inequitable patterns in special education classifications, placements, and disciplinary outcomes for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students labeled with a disability as compared to their white peers (U.S. ED, 2022; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Report [OCR], 2014). These patterns of racial inequity in special education, or racial disproportionality, have been documented for over 60 years (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968). Notably, the inequity is characterized by patterns of both over-representation and under-representation (Ahram et al., 2021). The racialized patterns are consequential since, as compared to students who are not labeled with a disability, people with disabilities are more likely to have lower employment rates and postsecondary completion outcomes (Carter et al., 2012; Houtenville & Rafal, 2020; Sanford et al., 2011).

Inadequate teaching and learning conditions and structural inequities in society generate educational opportunity gaps that, in turn, shape student outcomes (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Carter & Welner, 2013) like racial disproportionality, which is a historically situated, nuanced, and multifaceted inequity—spanning across both general and special education (Artiles, 2019; Thorius & Tan, 2015). For instance, culture and language differences between educators and caregivers can lead to gaps in special education service delivery (Kalyanpur et al., 2000), and educators' biases and misperceptions about student capacities to learn and caregivers' motivations can further hinder equitable service delivery (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2020; Strassfeld, 2019a; Wilson, 2015). Contextual factors such as sociodemographic contexts (Fish 2017, 2019), social interactions (Ahram et al., 2011; Harry & Klingner, 2014), and school and district segregation (Aylward et al., 2021; Eitle, 2002) also contribute to the persistence of inequities for disabled students. Relatedly, disciplinary policies and practices across both general and special education spaces disproportionally impact students at the intersection of race and disability (Annamma et al., 2019; Cruz et al., 2021).

Given the myriad root causes of racial disproportionality, addressing inequities in substantive ways in districts and schools is complex (Fergus, 2016; Hernández et al., 2022; Thorius, 2023). Systemic and equity-oriented alignment of both special and general education policies, procedures, practices, and people is necessary (Kozleski & Smith, 2009). Klingner et al. (2005) theorized that a culturally responsive educational systems approach, which critically assesses the intersections between policies, practices, and people as they deliver educational services to students, can potentially dismantle this inequity. In this sense, both *special* and *general* education systems must be considered when addressing the long-standing inequity for disabled students of color, inclusive of educators' beliefs and orientations to the inequity while working within these two systems.

Purpose

We employ the metaphor of an educational ecosystem at the district level (Woulfin, 2021) adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1992) ecological systems theory to enable an understanding of how racial disproportionality is addressed as both a special education and an equity issue in a midsized urban school district. Educational ecosystems include various educational constituents (e.g., district leaders, teachers, support staff) who work to improve student outcomes (Woulfin, 2021). In this paper, we identify two mesolevel ecosystems that influence educators' efforts to address racial disproportionality:1) special education and 2) equity ecosystems. Thus, the units of analysis in our study are these educational ecosystems since they are activated when a state education agency (SEA) cites a local education agency (LEA) via federal special education and disability policy, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which specifically requires tracking and monitoring of racial disproportionality in special education outcomes in the most recent 2016 regulations amendments (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. § 300.646, 2016). Using document analysis and semi-structured interview data, we demonstrate characteristics of equity and special education ecosystems and then examine how within one district—City Central School District (pseudonym, CCSD)—a districtwide equity ecosystem was expressed and experienced within the special education ecosystem. We asked the following research questions (RQs):

- **(RQ1):** What are the elements and features of equity and special education ecosystems at the district level?
- **(RQ2):** How is an equity ecosystem expressed and experienced in special education?

We first define what an educational ecosystem is at the mesolevel and clarify how the concept relates to organizational improvement for equity and special education. We then empirically examine how equity and special education ecosystems converge and diverge and discuss the implications for addressing racialized inequities. We highlight how racism and ableism are implicated in these convergences and divergences and conclude with recommendations for practice. The paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship focused on equity initiatives that can alter inequitable schooling conditions across general and special education spaces (e.g., Bal et al., 2022; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Irby et al., 2020; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014).

Educational Ecosystems

The metaphor of an educational ecosystem at the district level (Woulfin, 2021) is adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1992) ecological systems theory. The theory has been used to understand how children's interactions with the various levels of a socially situated ecosystem (e.g., individual, micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono) influence their academic and social development. The framework places emphasis on the significance of the relationships between who a child is and their environment, as well as how these relationships relate to contextual factors such as family, school, and neighborhood environments. The theory indicates that enriching relationships across the various levels of the ecosystem will likely enhance a child's overall well-being (see Aylward et al., 2022).

In our adapted version (see Voulgarides et al., forthcoming), the ***chrono***system refers to time, historical factors, and distal contextual forces affecting district activities. The ***macro***system represents cultural norms and values that shape the schooling process, while the ***exo***system refers to the formal and informal policy and social structures influencing how people engage and interact within meso-, micro-, and individual systems. The ***meso***system is comprised of the interactions between actors within a school and district as they deliver educational services that influence ***micro*** and ***individual*** systems. At the micro and individual levels, students' experiences and outcomes are influenced by educators' beliefs, actions, and assumptions about their capacity to learn in school within these nested systems. We situate our analysis in this paper at the meso-level to account for how the vast network of actors within an LEA—from the superintendent and other central office leaders to instructional coaches to special education teachers, paraprofessionals, service providers (e.g., speech language pathologist, occupational therapist), and student support staff—work in tandem and cooperatively to reach shared goals, which is, in this case, addressing racial disproportionality. Using this framing, we broadly define what comprises a special education and equity ecosystem to understand how an equity ecosystem is expressed and experienced in special education when a district is cited for racial disproportionality via IDEA policy. Equity expression refers to the outwardly visible equity statements and

declarations on district and school-level policies, practices, and procedures. On the other hand, equity experiences refer to the way in which educators *actually* implement, enact, and tangibly describe how their understandings of equity manifest in their daily practice.

Special Education Ecosystem

The special education ecosystem is tightly linked to IDEA, a sprawling piece of legislation specifically targeting students with disabilities from birth to age 21 in schools. The core components of IDEA include the legal guarantee to (a) a free, appropriate public education (FAPE), offered through an Individualized Education Program (IEP); (b) the least restrictive environment (LRE) for learning for each individual student; (c) nondiscriminatory evaluations to determine special education eligibility; (d) educational services regardless of the support needs associated with an individual student's condition; (e) procedural safeguards; and (f) robust parental/caregiver participation opportunities (IDEA, 2004).

IDEA accounts for racial disproportionality via performance-based accountability measures known as State Performance Plan (SPP) Indicators. The SPP Indicators have been in place since 2004; these indicators monitor SEA- and LEA-level racial disparities in special education classifications, placements, and disciplinary outcomes (Elbaum, 2014; Strassfeld, 2019b). For instance, if an SEA determines there is evidence of numerical racial disparities within an LEA based on an SEA-determined numerical metric, the LEA is cited via the indicator (Strassfeld, 2019b). Cited districts are typically required to show procedural compliance with IDEA and reduce numerical disparities in racialized outcomes across classifications, placements, and disciplinary outcomes (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. § 300.646, 2016).

Core components of the special education ecosystem are relatively stable across contexts due to a relatively undisturbed understanding of ability and disability in IDEA that is rooted in rehabilitation and civil rights frameworks established in the 1970s (Pettinicchio, 2019). For instance, students labeled with a disability via IDEA are provided FAPE through their IEP in the LRE, regardless of context. Additionally, when an SEA determines there is evidence of racial disproportionality using the SPP Indicator approach, LEAs must respond. While these core features are stable across contexts, localized implementation of the IDEA is variable and, often, patchwork (e.g., Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Koyama & Varenne, 2012).

At the mesolevel, educators adhere to IDEA legal principles. However, acts of IDEA compliance are infused with contextual and organizational dynamics and actor's contingencies, beliefs, and priorities that allow for localized logics of compliance to develop (Voulgarides, 2018; Voulgarides et al., 2021). These acts of compliance influence micro and individual systems and are legitimated at the exolevel via SEA IDEA compliance audits and monitoring. However, these acts of compliance can mask discriminatory behaviors that allow for racial inequities to persist under the guise of compliance (Voulgarides, 2022). This is because broader macro-ideologies—inclusive of racial and ability ideologies that are culturally determined and embedded within IDEA statutes—are not challenged via acts of policy compliance (Voulgarides et al., forthcoming). Compliance with IDEA does not require an explicit challenge to macrosystems. This contrasts with an equity ecosystem that directly engages with macro-ideologies and cultural norms.

Equity Ecosystem

An equity ecosystem, on the other hand, would challenge and disrupt macrolevel ideologies that are enacted across exo, meso, micro, and individual systems. An equity ecosystem, therefore, confronts or dismantles harmful ideologies and norms related to factors such as power, privilege, racism, white supremacist and racist (Diem & Welton, 2020), and ableist ideologies operating throughout the macro, meso, and micro layers of educational system (Voulgarides et al., 2023b). Further, the equity ecosystem both reflects and amplifies antiracist and social justice–oriented conceptualizations or institutional logics (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2021; Rigby, 2014).

Equity ecosystems establish avenues for organizational improvement for equity that name and address intersectional oppressions (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1990, 2017; Ishimaru et al., 2022) through, for example, culturally responsive (Khalifa, 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016), socially just (Theoharis, 2007), race and disability conscious (Fergus, 2016), and antiracist efforts (Irby, 2021). Thus, by engaging with macro-ideologies and cultural norms, including those of racism and ableism, an equity ecosystem can extend beyond symbolic and technical acts of policy compliance, a prevalent feature of the special education ecosystem.

The ideal equity ecosystem also delivers—or redistributes—resources to close gaps in opportunities, experiences, and outcomes as educators grapple with notions of justice, equity, and equality. In doing so, an equity ecosystem can challenge chrono factors that sustain educational opportunity gaps (Carter & Welner, 2013) and educational debts (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

In practice, the special education and equity ecosystems continually interact. However, when a district is cited for racial disproportionality, the special education and equity ecosystems converge at the mesolevel via a racial disproportionality-focused IDEA SPP indicator. Moreover, a citation for racial disproportionality in special education implicates complex intersections between race and ability in educational practice. Thus, when a district is cited, the intersection of race *and* disability is implicated, this means that,

by association, racism and ableism must become central foci (at minimum) of an equity ecosystem to ameliorate the inequity.

Ableism refers to the way in which socially constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, and productivity are placed on bodies and minds, and those that deviate from "normalcy" are looked down upon (Lewis, 2022). *Racism* assumes racial superiority and is enacted and sustained through intent, biases, and social structures (Ray, 2022). Ableism sustains racism by promoting anti-blackness, which is rooted in eugenic logics, colonialism, and the damaging historical intertwining of race with disability (Annamma et al., 2013; Lewis, 2022; Mayes, 2023). Racism and ableism are sustained across personal, interpersonal, and structural levels of society and schooling (e.g., Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Welton et al., 2018) and are thus embedded in school-based interactions, policies, and practices.

In the remainder of the paper, we describe how we empirically examined how an equity ecosystem was expressed and experienced in special education in efforts to address racial disproportionality.

Methods

The research was conducted during the 2020–2021 school year in a mid-sized urban school district in the Northeast United States given the pseudonym of City Central School District (CCSD). CCSD is a diverse urban school district comprised of approximately 11,000 students across 20 public schools. According to SEA and LEA data, CCSD has approximately 30% Black students, 20% Latinx students, 20% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students, 20% white students, and 10% multiracial students. The district has a vibrant and growing emergent bilingual population (5%), with most families coming from Central America. Over 60% of students classified with a disability were Black or Latinx. During the year of conducted research, the district had a proportional classification rate to that of the SEA (17%). Approximately 80% of the students attending CCSD were deemed to be "economically disadvantaged" by the SEA.

We used a single case study design (Yin, 2014). The case was bounded (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995) by theoretically and conceptually informed criteria that relate to special education and equity ecosystems. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, the district must have experienced significant disparities in special education outcomes identified via IDEA and the SPP Indicators. CCSD was cited for several years via the SPP Indicators prior to the year of research. In addition, CCSD had a relatively robust equity ecosystem, further described in the section "Findings."

The timing of the data collection was important to the framing and analysis. The research took place when schools experienced a considerable amount of volatility due to the COVID-19 global health pandemic and the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd (see Voulgarides, 2023a). Public conversations about racism and structural health inequities were omnipresent (Fulcher et al., 2023; Merritt, 2021) as well as political reactions and responses to these crises (Montanro, 2020; Wise, 2020), which collectively impacted schools (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Martin & Mulvihill, 2021). These cultural forces had a considerable impact on the macrosystems surrounding schools and thus, in a sense, amplified the role of equity ecosystems.

Data Collection and Analysis

To answer our research questions, we used two methodological approaches—document analysis and semistructured interviews. The document analysis provided insight into the structures, policies, and practices that were established prior to the onset of the global pandemic and the murder of George Floyd. They provide evidence of the structures and systems associated with each ecosystem that were established prior to and enacted during this volatile time period. The semistructured interviews provided real-time insights into the interpretations, experiences, and understandings of educators as they relate to the two ecosystems, both prior to the onset of the pandemic and during the volatile time period. Together, the document analyses and semistructured interviews provided a nuanced understanding of how the two socially, politically, culturally, and institutionally created ecosystems functioned. The multiple data points were used to generate thick and layered descriptions about the two ecosystems. They also provided insight into how educators made sense of equity issues and leveraged resources across both ecosystems to support students.

All four authors contributed to the manuscript development in various ways. We are a racially and ability-diverse team of researchers and educational practitioners. We have varied experiences working within special and general education spaces, serving multiply marginalized, disabled youth of color, and advocating for inclusive education in school systems. Our personal and professional identities, individually and as a team, shaped how the paper was conceptualized and how data were gathered and analyzed.

The interview and document data were collected by the first author. The first author conducted the granular and thematic analysis of the interviews. The first and fourth author, a graduate student, collectively analyzed the documents. The second and third authors helped synthesize the themes that emerged from the interview and document data. The writing team collectively analyzed the data using an interpretivist approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), which accounted for the nuanced way in which CCSD's ecosystems relate to broader sociocultural and historical factors (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002). The writing team also used the metaphor of an educational ecosystem to engage in analytic generalizations (Yin,

2014) to further understand how an equity ecosystem was expressed and experienced in special education in CCSD.

Documents. We conducted a systematic review of publicly available and privately acquired district documents, policies, and procedures. The privately acquired documents were given to the research team either before, during, or after an interview via email. These documents were voluntarily given. They were not solicited.

To gain a broad understanding of district operations, equity initiatives, and special education systems we placed a loosely defined six-year time frame on the documents that we collected and reviewed (2015–2021). The documents provided written evidence of what was well established in the district prior to the 2020–2021 school year. The publicly available documents consisted of, but were not limited to, newspaper articles, meeting minutes, district reports, training manuals, and professional development menus. The privately acquired documents consisted of but were not limited to, district- and department-level strategic plans, internal charts and progress reports, practitioners' PowerPoints, and district manuals. The full set of documents that were collected provided a robust understanding of the organizational context of CCSD and its formally stated district priorities as they related to district equity and special education ecosystems. Table 1 provides a sample list of documents that were reviewed.

We analyzed approximately 250 unique documents using a coarse step-wise-combined inductive and deductive process. First, we created an Excel spreadsheet that identified the core features of each document (i.e., intended audience, purpose, source). We included columns that identified whether the documents mentioned "equity" or "special education." We also coded what dimensions of a student's identity (i.e., race, disability, language, houselessness) were present in the document. We included a "memo" column that allowed the research team to provide notes about their general impressions of each document and how the contents of the document related to the paper's conceptual framing. We then used the "memo" column to refine the scope of our analysis—paying particular attention to the documents that related to special education systems, districtwide equity systems, and/or the convergence of the two. With this second level of organization and analysis, we reduced the data to a subset inclusive of approximately 50 documents that directly referenced some dimension of the two ecosystems of interest.

The first author then input this subset of documents into NVivo analytic software and bracketed large chunks of data (i.e., words or images) from each document that directly related to our conceptual and theoretical framing. The first author labeled and defined these chunks of data within NVivo using a broad code and then a smaller inductive code (e.g., equity ecosystem-superintendent message; special education ecosystem-inclusion). With this coding system, as a research team, we were able to track where and how the two ecosystems converged and diverged when making analytic generalizations. We used the themes emanating from this subset of documents to triangulate data gathered from the semistructured interviews and to further understand how an equity ecosystem was expressed and experienced in special education at the district level.

Semistructured Interviews. The first author conducted 23 semistructured interviews with an array of CCSD staff (i.e., school building leaders, special and general education teachers, and related service providers) to better understand the contours of and the relationships between the districtwide equity and special education ecosystems. Semistructured interviews allow researchers to engage with interviewees in a structured yet dynamic manner (Trainor, 2013). The interviews were conducted over Zoom and ranged from 60–90 minutes in length.

A snowball sampling technique was used to identify a broader sample of district participants (Patton, 2015). The method has been critiqued for outcomes such as sampling bias (Marcus et al., 2017), yet it remains an effective method for finding and recruiting networks of people who may not be readily accessible or visible to researchers and outsiders (Thorogood & Green, 2018; Woodley & Lockard, 2016).

Snowball sampling was initiated via a broadcast email sent to eligible participants through special education district channels. From there, participants indicated interest in the study and/or referred colleagues to be interviewed. All individuals who worked in the school district in an administrative (i.e., district and/or building level), instructional (i.e., teacher), or supportive capacity (i.e., speech pathologist) were eligible for inclusion in the study. They are part of the district's various ecosystems. No adults employed by CCSD in these roles were excluded from the study. Interviews were collected from participants working across ten different schools and within CCSD's central office. The approach yielded a broad and representative sample of educators who worked in and across various schools, offices, and administrative roles in CCSD.

Specifically, the interview sample included 3 people at the district level; 3 school building leaders at the middle and high school levels; 4 related service providers who worked at the elementary and middle school level; and 13 special educators who worked across elementary, middle, and high school levels. There were 19 people in the sample that identified as female and four that identified as male. Of the 23 interviewees, five were people of color. While there is staff diversity in CCSD, the specific race of the interviewees of color is not specified in the findings to further protect the confidentiality of research participants.

The semistructured interview protocol broadly examined how participants understood and made sense of their local

TABLE 1
Sample List of Documents Reviewed

Document	Source	Content
Board of Education Meeting Agenda	Publicly available	Meeting agenda with details about proposed resolutions, district presentations, and community and district updates.
Discipline Procedures for Students with Disabilities Staff Training Log	Privately acquired	Description of the policies, procedures, and processes for addressing disciplinary issues for students with disabilities that was used for staff training and to assure IDEA compliance.
2020–2021 District Budget Development PowerPoint	Publicly available	PowerPoint shared at a school board meeting with the district's budget outlined.
Equity Policy Committee Final Stakeholder Letter	Privately acquired	Staff created articulation of the scope, mission, and purpose of a districtwide equity committee.
Academic Report Quarter 2	Privately acquired	District and school level data on attendance, achievement, and discipline patterns.
Superintendent's Blue Book	Privately acquired	Superintendent's articulated mission, vision, policies, and procedures for the district.
Newspaper article	Publicly available	Report and public opinion of superintendent equity initiative related to school assignment rules.

context, workflow, and locally occurring inequities. It also examined how they leveraged or accessed organizational resources across general and special education spaces in the pursuit of educational equity. The interview protocol engaged with the ecosystems of interest and accounted for the unique characteristics of, and intersections between, the equity and special education ecosystems in CCSD. For example, an interview question that sought to establish relationships between the two ecosystems of interest asked: What equity concerns, if any, do you have about special education in your district? Interview questions that sought to understand how educators made sense of an equity ecosystem included: How do you define equity in education? What do you see, or think, is a pressing equity issue in your school district? Do you feel as though you have enough resources, funds, time, et cetera to meet the needs of students with disabilities in your school and/or district?

The interviews were analyzed using a two-fold analytic inductive and deductive approach (Charmaz, 2006; Miles et al., 2020). The approach considered what participants said in their interviews while also placing these data points within the parameters of the paper's conceptual framing. The analytic strategy was responsive to participant realities. It allowed us to authentically integrate driving theoretical frameworks with participant voice/experiences to shape the findings (Paris & Winn, 2013).

Each interview underwent three rounds of coding using NVivo analytic software. The first and second rounds of coding were inductive, resulting in line-by-line coding that then moved toward more focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Granular line-by-line codes included such things as, but were not limited to, "the continuum," "equity training," and "discipline strategy." These initial codes were then selectively grouped into broader thematic codes such as "inclusive special education" and "district mission and vision." All codes were defined within NVivo software so that they were uniformly applied across all data sources and identified patterns across participants were contextually linked. The third coding phase was more deductive and linked thematic codes to literature on educational ecosystems. The entire coding process was fluid and iterative, permitting us to explore how an equity ecosystem was expressed and experienced in special education in CCSD.

Data Integration. Finally, we integrated themes and results from the document and semistructured interview analyses. Relevant documents were linked to interviewee responses in NVivo software. Themes emerging from the document analysis were layered onto thematic and deductive codes derived from the interviews. For example, documents related to the district mission and vision were linked to interviewee responses that also mentioned the district's mission and vision. After the linking process was completed, select members of the research team wrote memos related to these linkages. The memos were then placed in relationship, once again, to the driving theoretical and conceptual framework of the paper. The findings on how an equity ecosystem was expressed and experienced in special education in CCSD that emerged from the analytic process are reported here.

Findings

Districtwide Equity and Special Education Ecosystems in CCSD

CCSD was described as a "high needs" district in SEA documents—referring to multiple factors of "need" such as low graduation rates and student achievement on state tests

TABLE 2
CCSD Special Education Classification and Graduation Rates

School Year	Special Education Classification Rate (%)	District Graduation Rate (%)	Special Education Graduation Rate (%)
2014–2015	17.7%	50%	22%
2015–2016	17.1%	62%	30%
2016–2017	17.4%	62%	34%
2017–2018	16.4%	62%	36%
2018–2019	16.7%	68%	49%

Sources: State education website and district-provided documents.

along with community poverty levels. CCSD also received less funding than surrounding districts due to SEA funding formulas. Its schools were also racially and economically segregated, which is common in urban centers (Reardon & Owens, 2014; Scott & Holme, 2016). For years, Superintendent Washington (pseudonym) attempted to address the impact of these structural inequities on CCSD schools, educators, families, and students by building a robust districtwide equity ecosystem, with a particular focus on racial and socioeconomic inequality.

For instance, Superintendent Washington allocated funds toward developing programs that would increase graduation rates, improve academic outcomes, reduce racial disproportionality, and eliminate racial and disability disparities in out of school suspensions. A local newspaper said Superintendent Washington built programs in CCSD that considered how "poverty and trauma" impacts students. Another newspaper article stated that Superintendent Washington had built a local and statewide "profile" for being at the forefront of educational equity work. District budget proposals indicated that equity-oriented programming was a priority. Significant funds were dedicated to trauma-sensitive training for staff and to increasing staff capacity around culturally responsive practices. District-provided data indicated that under Superintendent Washington's tenure, district graduation rates and academic achievement rates increased, while special education classification rates decreased (See Table 2).

Superintendent Washington's districtwide staff handbook, often referred to as *The Book*, outlined the contours of the districtwide equity ecosystem. According to a white male building administrator, *The Book* was a treasure trove of resources, and it was "about 400 and some odd pages, with everything from the [demographic] current context of [the district] to [student] engagement, student-centeredness, routines and processes for managing your school department, collaborative problem-solving, trauma-sensitive schools, data-driven decision making," and so forth. The administrator added that the contents of *The Book* were "pulled from all different texts," and it broke down how to execute "culturally responsive routines and processes for running your building, broken down by weekly, daily, regularly, and yearly" tasks. *The Book* was a comprehensive outline of district operations, priorities, and initiatives.

The Book also clearly articulated a broad equity-based mission and vision for the district, to which interviewees often referred. The messaging was centered around educational equity, and it invoked the need for structural, programmatic, and personal change in the pursuit of educational equity. Messages such as "The school will serve as a vehicle of social justice," "We must ensure race, socioeconomic status, and disability are not predictors of student achievement," "The pathology does not rest within the child; the pathology rests within the system," and "If we [educators] are unable to respond appropriately to these children, it is our problem for not building a system that meets their needs," were evident across multiple documents, both public and internal facing.

The Book messages were also evident within the special education ecosystem. The special education department was led by a multiperson administrative team that oversaw various components of special education delivery across the district's schools. According to district documents, there was a fluctuating group of four to six district-level administrators who oversaw IEP administration, discipline, behavior, committee on special education meetings, and so forth across the district.

According to district documents and to internal PowerPoint presentations, the working theory of change for the special education department was that "good instruction," provided "through a social and emotional lens and culturally responsive" practices, would foster special education equity. This "theory of change," as it was commonly referred to in district documents, was layered onto core components of the national special education ecosystem. A FAPE was provided to students via their IEP in the LRE, and these actions were responsive to CCSD's equity focus. The elements and features of the equity ecosystem were linked, on paper, to broader equity messages—with a particular focus on the intersection between race and disability.

The linkages between the two ecosystems were partly in response to Superintendent Washington's equity vision and

mission and to the fact that CCSD had been cited via the SPP Indicators for racial disproportionality for consecutive years—a common occurrence for urban school districts (Voulgarides et al., 2013). Due to this, race was discussed in relation to disability in practice. A white female school counselor stated that in the past five years, "there has been a total surge" in equity messaging coming from the special education department. A white female special education teacher stated that "whenever you have meetings" with district or building administrators, "they'll remind you of the district's vision" around equity and the need to monitor racial disparities. Interviewees expressed that these reminders were frequent. Symbolically and on paper, the equity and special education ecosystems converged. However, the district was consistently cited via IDEA for racial disproportionality—indicating the presence of a complex relationship between how equity was expressed and experienced within the special education ecosystem.

Equity Expressions and Experiences Within the Special Education Ecosystem

Educators described how convergences and divergences between the equity ecosystem and special education policies, procedures, and practices were experienced and expressed on a daily basis. They acknowledged that the equity ecosystem impacted their belief systems. However, despite shifting their beliefs, there was limited equity absorption across well-established special education policies and practices. *Equity absorption* refers to the way in which macrolevel cultural and social forces that challenge racism and ableism do or do not permeate other system levels (i.e., meso, micro) to effectuate change. Both equity expressions and experiences are consequential at the mesolevel. An expression is the conspicuous statements and declarations on district and school-level policies, practices, and procedures, while equity experiences relate to the way in which educators *actually* implement, enact, and tangibly describe how their understandings of equity manifest in their daily practice. Equity absorption requires the convergence of expressions as well as experiences.

The data indicated that limited equity absorption was related to low expectations for disabled students, unclear special education programming and placement procedures, and symbolic compliance with equity ethos and IDEA structures. These factors led to an inverse relationship between the equity and special education ecosystems whereby interviewees described restrictive settings as sites of agency for effectively meeting student needs. This is a particularly interesting finding because it highlights how notions of equal opportunity and access related to disability rights and the national special education ecosystem may be at odds with equity ecosystem ethos around inclusivity. These factors, collectively, created a gulf between what was stated in equity messaging and what *actually* occurred in practice. They coalesced around a hallmark equity initiative that was created in response to the district's history of citations for racial disproportionality, further described later.

Shifts in Beliefs. The equity ecosystem expanded how educators understood their role and purpose within the special education ecosystem. A white male special education teacher noted that he was both personally and professionally impacted by the equity focus: "I think that for the first time in my career, I have been challenged to look at the needs of my students outside of what their school needs are, and to think about their emotional needs more, where they're coming from, what they may not have gotten in the past, and to focus on obviously the instruction of these students, but also the person that you're instructing, and their experiences." A male special educator of color stated, "What I'm proud of, is that we're starting to do a lot of work around anti-racism and the inequities that are happening to Brown and Black students" within a special education space. A white male special education teacher said he has taught special education for "over a decade," but the "equity dynamic" in CCSD kept him "fresh in a sense" and ready to do what was needed to meet student needs. Further, a white female psychologist expressed how the equity-oriented professional development provided by the district impacted her personally and professionally: "I've definitely learned a lot about myself as far as my . . . [for] lack of a better word, prejudices or assumptions about race that were subtly inside my thinking." These points of convergence between the two ecosystems were notable as multiple interviewees expressed a sense of personal and professional renewal and growth.

However, some staff members were critical of the pressure to consider equity within the special education system. These sentiments typically came from veteran teachers in the district—those who reported working in CCSD for more than 15 years. For instance, a woman of color and a high school special education teacher thought the equity messaging "was too soft" on students with "an IEP" and let them get away with "bad" behaviors—pointing to a complex dynamic associated with lowered expectations for disabled students and, in particular, disabled students of color. A white female school psychologist thought the equity messaging was racist because teachers made excuses for student behavior instead of holding them accountable for their actions. These interviewees were in the minority, but there was some discontent expressed about the fusion between the two ecosystems. It points to differences in how interviewees personally interpreted the meaning of equity and how they experienced the equity mission and vision in CCSD.

Low Expectations for Disabled Students. Interviewees also noted that students with disabilities in CCSD faced low expectations, stigma, and biases within the special education ecosystem that were not sufficiently challenged by the equity

ecosystem. A woman of color special education teacher noted special education has "come a long way," in reference to its sordid history of seclusion and institutionalization (Mayes, 2023; Nielsen, 2012), but "there is a stigma placed on students with special needs" and not everyone sees their "awesomeness." She added that when colleagues speak about her classroom, they "assume" it is "the crazy room." She was saddened by this because "once you're in the classroom with them [students with disabilities] and you actually take time to get to know them, you learn about how smart and witty they are and how much they can achieve and how much you wish other people could see that also." Another woman-of-color special educator described how she felt a disconnect between what she believed her kids could accomplish and what the school system expected of special education students. She stated, "I sometimes feel like . . . [I am not] the best fit" for special education in CCSD because of the low expectations directed at her students and despite the broader equity messaging in the district. She provided an example of how the special education administrative team communicated that she should "be able to maintain attention [of students] for 15 minutes," but this was too low of a bar for her. She said, "My expectation is that you're gonna maintain [student] attention throughout my entire lesson." She felt a strong disconnect between what administration expected versus how she wanted to teach her students. The equity ecosystem did not challenge these low expectations or stigmas operating within the special education ecosystem, despite educators claiming the equity ecosystem influenced their beliefs about students.

Unclear Programming and Placement Procedures. Equity absorption was also limited by unclear programming and placement procedures within the special education ecosystem. Despite district documents outlining clear placement procedures for students with disabilities derived from IDEA mandates that were layered with equity messaging, interviewees indicated they were unclear about why and how students were placed in special education classrooms. Interviewees also indicated that students were rarely able to move out of the special education ecosystem. These findings illustrate two mechanisms whereby racial disproportionality occurs—via the receipt of special education services and via the receipt of these services in restrictive settings.

With regards to the classification of students with disabilities and the receipt of special education services, a white female special educator stated, "there's no clear outline" for how kids get placed into a particular classroom. She added that it seemed like students were placed in restrictive classrooms because of "disciplinary behavior issues" rather than an "actual student disability." A woman of color special educator stated, "sometimes, to be honest with you, I'm not really sure what [my students] disabilities are," despite being given labels in their IEPs. A white female special educator said that student classifications and placement were not "necessarily" related to "strict procedures around [IDEA] processes," adding that student placement decisions felt more like a "matching of teachers and personality of students." Another white female special educator stated, "it just seems like it goes from here to here very quickly," referring to the process in which students were placed into special education.

With regards to the receipt of special education services in restrictive settings, a male special educator of color noted: "I think there's too much segregation in special education, and especially in self-contained settings." A white female special educator had a similar sentiment. She felt as though special education students in CCSD "don't really have an opportunity to spend time with" kids outside of their restrictive environment. And she wished they could be "more a part of the school" than they currently were. Another white woman special educator stated that students with disabilities were segregated in CCSD at a "very young age." A white male special educator stated, "I don't believe that there's a way to get out of special education," in CCSD. A man of color and a special educator said, "once you are labeled as a student with a disability, who has an IEP and needs to go in this sort of program," it is "hard to move out" of that track in CCSD. He clarified that students moved within the special education ecosystem but not out of it: "There's . . . a lot of movement for students" and "students will change programs," but they never leave the special education track. According to these interviewees, the special education ecosystem appeared to trap students. These responses reveal ambiguities related to processes and procedures and a level of distrust in how the special education ecosystem was enacted in CCSD.

Symbolic Compliance. The gulf between symbolic attention to equity and the day-to-day realities of educational practice in CCSD also limited equity absorption. Within the special education system, equity was described as superficially and fragmentedly layered upon educators' responsibilities leading to symbolic compliance with IDEA and equity initiatives.

A man of color and a special education teacher stated, "I've translated it [equity] into my practice," but "I don't" think "it's translated across the board" as "there's a lot of gaps" still related to the intersection between special education and equity and the resources available to meaningfully achieve equity outcomes. A white female special educator stated that because the equity initiatives "came from higher up"—for example, from the superintendent and the special education administrative team—she didn't think all her colleagues were committed to the equity work. She stated, "There's some people who really are in it for the right reasons, and then there's some people who are like, 'Yup, this is a box I gotta check to . . . keep my job.'" The additive nature

of the layering of equity messages onto special education policies, procedures, and practices contributed to symbolic acts of compliance that masked harmful practices (Voulgarides, 2018, 2022). These tensions were evident in relation to LRE—a hallmark statute of the IDEA that is tightly linked to the notion of inclusion.

According to district documents emanating from the special education ecosystem, LRE would unfold via inclusive settings that "allow students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum and include the explicit, systematic, direct instruction students need to close the achievement gap." Further, inclusion was described in CCSD's *Special Education Service Guide* as a continuum of services designed for students that "have below average to above average cognitive abilities and significant deficits in reading and math" and who may need "support and explicit teaching of social skills to address behavioral needs." The service guide provided direct evidence of the translation of the national special education ecosystem and the LRE statute to the local context. This guide also stated that teachers working in inclusive spaces were provided with "high-quality professional development" related to "collaboration, explicit instruction, differentiation, specially designed instruction, and co-teaching [strategies]." These supports included "common planning time" for educators so that they could foster and develop "good co-teaching relationships" when working in inclusive spaces. The service guide clearly outlined the purpose, function, and goals of the local special education ecosystem as it related to inclusion. It was also wrapped into the broader equity-oriented theory of change guiding the special education department. However, according to interviewees and unlike what the documents stated, a gulf between what was written on paper and what happened on a day-to-day basis existed within this ecosystem.

A white female special educator stated that coteacher schedules were not "thoughtfully" created, and this made it difficult for teachers across general and special education spaces to plan their lessons and curriculum. Another white female special educator stated that "good co-teaching is like a marriage" and "there's gotta be a connection" between the adults working together in the "co-teach space." However, she added, "co-teaching is a crap shoot [in CCSD], you're just randomly assigned" to a partnership, and "you don't get to pick your co-teacher and establish the relationship prior to" teaching in an inclusive space. Because of this, she felt as though students with disabilities did not "have a shot at" a strong and comprehensive academic schedule. The disjuncture between what was stated on paper and what occurred in practice created equity gaps around planning structures and professional relationships.

There was also an equity tension associated with maintaining symbolic compliance with special education paperwork; this kept CCSD's special education ecosystem functioning and in compliance with the national special education ecosystem while constraining equity absorption. A white female special education teacher said that IDEA compliance meant "crossing my T's and dotting my I's," as it was "part of the job," but that the paperwork demands were "just overwhelming." She added that she spends an "inordinate" amount of time adding "canned comments [into IEPs], that means absolutely nothing" and that were "not telling my parents anything new or anything they don't know" about their child. She did this because she had to—it was a requirement of both the national and the local special education ecosystems. A woman of color and special educator said that with all the data and paperwork expectations in the special education department, "Sometimes I don't take enough time to work on building . . . relationships" with students. She added that the focus on data collection for IEPs "can keep me from doing some of the things that I feel like I should be working on," like strengthening and sustaining relationships with students. This educator sensed that the burdens of compliance reduced their capability to conduct other, equity-centered activities. To this point, a man of color and a special educator said special education in CCSD was "kind of backwards as far as equity goes" in both its structure and ethos.

These issues were further exacerbated by the data collection needs associated with the merging of the two ecosystems. The district equity ecosystem required all educators (i.e., leaders, teachers, related service providers) to collect data on students that was disaggregated by race, gender, special education classification, and so forth. The data were regularly analyzed by district- and building-level teams to identify inequities. It was also used to inform who might benefit from the continuum, who may need to move toward special education classification, and so forth. In addition to these steps, special educators were also required to collect student-level data to inform IEP goals. The converging of the two ecosystems around data collection was overwhelming for educators and thus lost meaning.

A white female special educator said that the push for data collection across the district was so "intense" that "it's [the data] not reliable." She clarified that she and her colleagues "gathered" data just so it could "be gathered." She added, "it's absolutely frustrating" because most of her colleagues "don't even understand the data" that they are asked to collect. Another white female special educator stated that the district special education administration team pressured teachers "always" asking for "data, data, data, we're gonna be data driven." A man of color and special educator described how the data had little to no meaning for his practice: "We do a lot of data [and] I spend so much time on data, but data is just to have something to show when somebody asks." He added, "I'm never gonna look at it again. It's just like, I feel like I need to have all of this information, just in case somebody asks me for it. And I think that that's what we do in the district. We're not really. . . . We're collecting data,

or a lot of the data that we have is just in case." A white female special education teacher expressed that she understood the purpose of data collection, but it superseded humanistic connections: "You need to collect data to hold people accountable [but] on the other hand, this other teacher I worked with who was really, really horrible and toxic, [to students] did all that paperwork [data] really well," and she was praised by the administration for her data. The equity initiatives became symbolic within the special education ecosystem and no longer served an equity purpose.

Restrictive Settings. When interviewees described their experiences working within or near the most restrictive classroom settings in CCSD, a complex and inverse relationship between the equity and special education systems emerged. The farther away students classified with a disability moved from inclusive spaces, the more often interviewees expressed greater convergence between personal equity ideals and special education systems. Crucially, these equity ideals were tightly linked to disability rights as enshrined in IDEA and not to the ethos of the district equity ecosystem. Triangulation of documents and interview responses indicated that there were tight linkages between administrative structures, IDEA mandates, and restrictive settings that promoted a sense of agency for achieving equity in special education. Educators working in restrictive settings expressed a sense of agency related to positively impacting student outcomes without leveraging the language of the broader equity ecosystem. Segregated placements and restrictive settings were tightly linked to disability rights and the provision of special education services and supports via IDEA provisions and procedural protections.

For instance, a white female special education teacher working in a restrictive setting stated, "I feel really supported here [in CCSD]," adding that she can get access to resources mandated in a student's IEP "easily." She said, "if I need something to be successful . . . whether it is a heavy-weighted lap band or bands, sensory tools, different partitions, a different type of chair, a different type of desk, all I gotta do is just ask and work with OT [occupational therapy] and I get it." Specific resources like the ones she listed were readily available and responsive to the students with the most significant needs. In line with IDEA ethos, individualized supports were readily available to the students who needed them. The funding for these resources was available via IDEA.

The inverse relationship between equity ethos and restrictive settings was described in several interviews. A white female special educator expressed that she felt "weary" about what would happen to her students if/when they were placed in a less restrictive setting. Another white woman special educator spoke about a student she had who was "excel[ing]" academically and behaviorally in a restrictive setting, but once the student began to interact with the broader district ecosystem, their progress faltered. She had little understanding of what support the child got in an inclusive program: "Where does he [the student] go? What happens? I don't know!" The weariness came from a realization that "inclusion" in CCSD was not well-defined or structured in practice, despite extensive document evidence indicating otherwise and the notion of inclusion being tightly linked to equity ideals.

The tensions associated with limited equity absorption within the special education system converged around a hallmark equity program in CCSD—the continuum, which Superintendent Washington and his administrative team built in response to CCSD's repeated citations for disproportionality. Within the continuum, equity expressions and experiences collided in ways that reified ableist organizational mechanisms and inequities in special education outcomes.

"The Continuum." Within the CCSD context, the continuum was a deliberate merging of the equity and the special education ecosystem to address racial disproportionalities in response to years of citations via IDEA and the SPP Indicators. It was a hallmark equity initiative that put the equity and special education ecosystems in direct contact using a multitiered systems of support (MTSS) framework, which uses data to inform instructional and behavioral supports through tiers of support (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011; Friend, 2013).

According to district documents, the goal of the continuum was to align academic and behavioral supports around Tier 3 interventions—the most intense level of support in an MTSS framework—to reduce disproportionalities. Students did not need to have an IEP to receive these supports, but the supports were "special education-like" as one white female general education teacher stated. A white female special educator stated that the continuum "is basically a self-contained room, but for kids who are not classified" but are "falling through the cracks and who need . . . a home base and extra support." This educator was invoking how a protected and restrictive space was used to serve students with more intense academic and behavioral needs. According to another white female special educator, the students who interacted with the continuum were "somewhere in between" general and special education systems but they were not classified.

The continuum was complex, and its programming and services stretched across the district's schools. For example, at the high school, the continuum consisted of seven layers of support that increased in intensity and required a significant amount of funds and repurposing of teacher time and resources. Within those seven layers, there were additional tailored programs and supports focused on behavior and academics. Students were typically placed in the continuum by administrators, with the logic that the student demonstrated

a need for wraparound services while avoiding a special education classification.

Highly skilled educators were siphoned to work in the continuum. They were given many different tasks and roles, yet the program was well-resourced. A white female related service provider said that "the strongest" teachers were asked to teach in the program. These teachers generally expressed that they enjoyed working in the continuum and felt supported and respected by district-level administration.

District-provided data indicated that the continuum reduced special education classification rates (see Table 2). However, while classifications did decrease, other troubling trends were noted. According to official district reports and data analyses, "Students being served through the Continuum are making accelerated growth, but students being served in the Special Education system are falling further behind their age peers." The data indicated that students in special education were not progressing at the expense of the continuum, which, ironically, was built in response to both an equity and special education need. To this point, a white female special educator stated that the continuum was "not doing what" it was built to do because it was further "tracking kids" rather than helping them. She added it validated teachers' decisions to push kids out of their classrooms and provided a space for teachers "to get rid of kids" that they did not want to work with without having to classify them with a disability. The students that were "filling" the continuum were mostly "Black and Brown students" according to a white female special educator that mirrored disproportionalities within the special education ecosystem. The converging of the two ecosystems around the continuum replicated inequities rather than addressed them even though classification rates fell. A female special educator of color stated,

> I know [that administration is] trying to put in a lot of [intervention] systems in place. But I don't know, to be honest with you, if equity is what we are heading towards. I think that that might be the goal, but I'm not always sure that we know how to get there, or if we're able to have an open enough mind to get there.

The response to the citation numerically lowered special education classifications, but it replicated racialized systems of inequity without a disability label. It also did little to change academic and behavioral outcomes for the students who remained in special education or ableist beliefs surrounding special education service delivery systems.

Discussion

In this paper, we illuminated how two educational ecosystems—an equity and special education ecosystem—related to educator's efforts to address racialized inequities in special education within a single district. The equity ecosystem was expressed and experienced within the special education system in complex ways that both promoted equity (e.g., belief changes) and hindered it (e.g., symbolic compliance). The resulting limited equity absorption was related to low expectations for disabled students, unclear programming and placement procedures, and symbolic compliance with equity ethos and IDEA guidelines. These factors complicated equity efforts in ways that were counterintuitive, as evidenced by the agency educators felt when working in restrictive settings and via the continuum, which was a targeted program created in response to CCSD's citations for racial disproportionality.

Using the lens of an educational ecosystem adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1992), data also reveal that special education and equity ecosystems operate on different ideological planes. The special education ecosystem preserves exo, meso, and microstructures related to special education service delivery without challenging practitioner's understandings of dis/ability. On the other hand, the equity ecosystem is less specific and targeted. That is, the equity ecosystem tackles macrolevel ideologies through, for example, culturally responsive programming and attempts to shift practitioners' belief systems about student identities and experiences. The equity ecosystem is more closely tethered to, and intent upon disrupting, macro- and chrono-ecosystemic factors.

The disjuncture between the foci of each ecosystem hindered the construction of coherence across ecosystems. Moreover, the disjuncture limited the merging of experiences and expressions and hindered equity absorption, which, ironically, promoted ableism and racism. Notions of ability and disability have remained rather static, albeit disorganized, within federal disability legislation since the 1960s—vacillating between medical, rehabilitative, and civil rights orientations (Pettinichio, 2019), and within research (Cruz et al., 2023). The formal and informal special education structures that develop at the exo-level and shape meso- and micro-actions via IDEA policy and regulation encompass these conceptualizations of disability. They are sturdy and tethered to the national special education ecosystem, which, in turn, can leave locally enacted special education ecosystems relatively unresponsive to equity shifts. Voulgarides (2023b) describes this as a "compliance paradigm" that is embedded within special education and that "generate[s] ethical and moral dilemmas for educators" as they provide special education services via a rights-based framework while also maintaining a deficit and interventionist lens (p. 375). Our data demonstrate that, via this compliance paradigm, ableism and discrimination are sanctioned through special education structures, policies, and procedures.

Moreover, when race and disability collide via a citation for disproportionality, a significant point of tension arises between the equity and special education ecosystems. Although these two ecosystems interact at many junctures, they are not forced to interact in a targeted manner until a

citation is issued. And when they do interact via a citation, race and disability must be considered in tandem in practice. Through this collision, notions of ability and disability that have been established in IDEA can be challenged via robust equity ecosystems that engage with, for example, the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and eugenics and how these historical realities impact multiply marginalized disabled students of color (Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles, 2011). An equity ecosystem can name racism and challenge ableism while the special education ecosystem can center disability rights. Through the merging of the two systems, the ossification of ableism and racism in the structures, routines, and practices of schooling can be shifted. Both systems can act in concert to impact change, but, as evidenced in the data, they did not do so.

CCSD's districtwide equity ecosystem was broadly focused on organizational improvement for equity. Superintendent Washington and his administrative team aligned resources to provide staff with trauma-informed and culturally responsive professional development opportunities—centering issues of race and socioeconomic status. Equity-oriented messages were clearly articulated in documents and by practitioners. The equity focus was layered onto the special education ecosystem. Educators working within the special education ecosystem reported that their beliefs and mindsets were influenced by the equity ecosystem, but special education policies, practices, and procedures limited equity absorption. As such, intersectional equity absorption that considers both race and disability was hindered.

Additionally—and signaling flaws in the infrastructure enabling absorption—there were gaps in the design and enactment of professional development for teachers, staff, and leaders regarding equity-oriented special education. Although the special education administrative team attempted to increase educators' awareness of a student's race due to the citation for racial disproportionality, the awareness had little substantive impact on the ideologies that shape how special education operates. A student's race and disability status were publicly noted, but this did not mean that these intersections were sufficiently interrogated for their equity impacts. The omnipresence of low expectations for students with disabilities remained intact. And while the special education administrative team's equity messaging was consistent (i.e., as evidenced in the special education department theory of change), it did not translate to practice as intended. The data indicated that the special educators who took up the equity mission and vision in their day-to-day practice did so out of personal conviction rather than a theory of change articulated by the special education department or by *The Book*. We posit conditions and resources, including time and supports for ongoing professional learning, were inadequate for deeply shifting the vision, guidelines, and conceptions in this context.

The limited intersectional equity absorption also links to how ableism and racism function in society as well as in this district. The intertwining of race and disability are often left unquestioned in educational practice (Annamma et al., 2013) and in policy (Cruz et al. 2023). Therefore, a shift in beliefs in response to the equity ecosystem was a necessary—but insufficient step—toward disrupting IDEA structures and harmful macro-ideologies embedded within mesolevel enactments of special education. A shift in educators' beliefs is important, but it is only one component of the change that is needed to address the racism and ableism implicated in the disproportionality problem. These findings were particularly interesting given that the highly volatile political and social context within which the study occurred (COVID-19 pandemic and murder of George Floyd) amplified deep-seated inequities.

CCSD's special education documents contained equity messages; however, these messages were not fully infused into special education practices. These practices were structurally linked to the national special education ecosystem, and they remained relatively undisturbed when equity messages were layered onto them. Because the macrosystem was not challenged, the superficial layering limited equity absorption. Racism and ableism were permitted to persist via the very mechanisms that were designed to protect the rights of students with disabilities as espoused in IDEA.

Further, the data indicate that the SPP Indicator approach is ill-equipped to address racial disproportionality. The SPP Indicator approach requires further compliance with IDEA statutes. While IDEA compliance may impact the individual, micro-, and mesolevels of the ecosystem, it does not sufficiently account for how racialized and ableist ideological and normative assumptions about students and communities function at the macro-, exo-, and chrono-levels (Voulgarides et al., forthcoming). The SPP Indicators require decontextualized compliance remedies that mute broader equity concerns. The lack of substantive macrolevel ideological collisions between the two ecosystems, when a district is cited for racial disproportionality, hinders substantive equity shifts. The dynamic was particularly evident with regard to restrictive settings and to the continuum.

CCSD's special education ecosystem appeared to be highly responsive to intense student needs. The national and local special education ecosystems were tightly aligned in restrictive settings and interviewees working in these settings reported that they felt supported. The individualized nature of IDEA "worked" here. Targeted interventions, resources, and supports were given to individual students with high needs. However, this individualized approach lies in direct contrast to research that shows educational equity issues such as disproportionality are related to an amalgam of root causes that cannot be solved by a single intervention or remedy (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010). Broadscale efforts to address complex education inequities

cannot rely on resource-intensive individualized remedies. This was clear with regards to the continuum.

CCSD instituted the continuum to support students positioned at the boundary of the special education and district-wide equity ecosystems. While the continuum was designed for students who are not officially part of the special education ecosystem (i.e., did not have an IEP), it replicated structures related to the special education ecosystem. Resources were diverted to the program, and it appeared to reduce classification rates (Table 2). However, as interviewees noted, the program still marginalized and isolated students, allowed for deficit and harmful beliefs about students to persist, and did not challenge broader ableist and racist social forces. Thus, while students who were deeply embedded within the continuum appeared to be succeeding and teachers working in the program felt supported, special education students were still marginalized. District data and documents directly noted this phenomenon.

The findings also illustrate how educators focus on disability within the special education space but rarely within the broader equity ecosystem. In foregrounding disability in the special education space but not in the equity ecosystem, ableism runs rampant and hinders educators' understandings of how disability intersects with other identities to impact equity outcomes. Relatedly, the absence and silence of race in the special education ecosystem limits intersectional equity absorption across ecosystems. This may account for why students in the continuum had better academic outcomes than those in the inclusive classroom. Ableist pathologizing processes embedded within the special education system made the inclusive space harmful rather than beneficial for students receiving special education services.

Finally, the findings illustrate how engaging in equity-focused work can be an exercise in understanding (or not) a shared vocabulary. That is, practitioners within this study often explored how their shared understanding of administrators' interpretations of equity helped them to either advance in their own equity work or to claim a larger role within existing equity efforts. This signals that, for practitioners, personal beliefs regarding equity are often considered in conjunction with an interpretation of how well (or not) these beliefs align with administration. This means that within the delicate balance of equity within education and special education ecosystems, there are a multiplicity of often unseen or underexamined fractures that can shape relationships within these ecosystems.

Conclusion

This article raises important questions about broad scale efforts related to organizational improvement for equity and the factors that contribute to or can alter inequitable schooling conditions (e.g., Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Irby et al., 2020; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). By placing special education at the forefront of the analysis using the lens of an educational ecosystem, we address an aspect of organizational improvement for equity that is currently missing in the literature and that directly engages with both ableism and racism. The special education ecosystem individualizes student needs through a disability-focused lens. The equity ecosystem privileged broadscale equity efforts but left special education–related matters to the special education ecosystem. This bifurcated approach limited equity absorption and points to the need for intersectional equity efforts that allow for educational ecosystem boundaries to be more porous and inclusive so that ableism and racism can be simultaneously targeted in broad-scale systemic equity efforts.

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