

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY TEACHERS AT ONE STATE-  
APPROVED PRIVATE SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL IN CONNECTICUT  
REGARDING DISPARITIES AMONG RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY  
DIVERSE STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY TEACHERS AT ONE STATE-APPROVED PRIVATE SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL IN CONNECTICUT REGARDING DISPARITIES AMONG RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

The problem explored in this qualitative phenomenological study was the need to understand the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021). Themes that emerged from the literature were equity requirements in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2019), disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, causes of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, and educational practices to support racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. Data for this study were gathered from semi structured interviews from six participants who taught at Maplewood Academy (pseudonym). The findings of this study highlight the existence of disparities and emphasize the ongoing need for research to address the issue of inequities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education. The lived experiences gained from this study can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding disparities among students with emotional or learning disorders, prompting further exploration and potential interventions.

***Keywords:*** disparities, racially and socially diverse students, equity, special education, support

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Yangkyun Heo, who always prioritized education. It is also dedicated to my father-in-law, Dr. David Wong, who was a lifelong educator and a tireless advocate against racism. They both supported my life and education unwaveringly. I wish they were here with us so I could show how much they have influenced and impacted me. I believe they would be proud of my hard work from heaven. Thank you, fathers.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Disparities have remained among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, despite the accumulation of extensive research data, the allocation of public resources, and the creation of new policies dedicated to improving outcomes (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2019 describes 13 qualification categories for special education: specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, other health impairment, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, deafness, and deaf-blindness. Under this law, students aged 3–21 years may be eligible to receive services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or reading intervention (IDEA, 2019). Note: The eligible age has been extended to 22 years old in Connecticut (Public Act, 2023).

Despite the efforts of researchers to study disparities in special education and nationwide policy attempts to improve these disparities, no significant improvements have occurred among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, especially those diagnosed with emotional and learning disorders (Cavendish et al., 2018; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). Diagnoses such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and learning disability rely on psychologists' professional judgment rather than medical criteria (Annamma et al., 2014; Skrtic et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Labeling racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders has negative effects on the students' education and life outcomes, although the purpose of special education is to provide additional support (Jackson et al., 2016). Those students may experience stigma and find themselves placed in self-

contained programs or classes with lower-level curricula and limited resources (Jackson et al., 2016).

P. Morgan et al. (2017) claimed that disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students in special education concealed societal matters such as poverty and living environments. P. Morgan et al. assumed that focusing on disparities based solely on race or ethnicity could lead to a misguided conclusion that U.S. schools were racially discriminatory. However, research based on the assumption of a connection between students' racial diversity and socioeconomic factors may lead to a misconceptualization: Racially and ethnically diverse students may be more likely than other students to come from low-income families. Students from low-income families may experience exposure to greater risk factors from a young age and may not show readiness in school. As a result, these students may qualify for special education.

In addition, researchers have linked socioeconomic variables predicated on the assumption that all diagnoses were fair and unbiased (Collins et al., 2016). Examination of rates of diagnosis among students from the same socioeconomic group revealed that racially and ethnically diverse students received diagnoses of emotional and learning disorders about twice as often as White students (Grindal et al., 2019). The results of these studies regarding connections with socioeconomic factors in special education do not explain why racially and ethnically diverse students receive diagnoses of emotional and learning disorders more frequently than their peers do (Jackson et al., 2016). Regardless of severity of disciplinary action, degree of school poverty, and type of public school attended, disparities have remained pervasive (Grindal et al., 2019; Nowicki, 2020; Skiba et al., 2008).

Whatever perspectives researchers have regarding overrepresentation of the connection with socioeconomic factors, researchers have agreed that disparities exist among racially and

ethnically diverse students with special needs and that students should receive equitable education (Farkas et al., 2020; Nowicki, 2020; Pak & Parsons, 2020). To address disparities in discipline rates among racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders, the U.S. Department of Education has mandated public schools to report data for equity in three categories under the IDEA (2019): *disproportionate representation*, *significant discrepancy*, and *significant disproportionality*. The Definition of Key Terms section provides definitions and details of these equity requirements.

The goal of the equity requirements is to foster equity by ameliorating existing inequalities in the treatment of racially and ethnically diverse students with disabilities (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021). Students with disabilities should be with their peers in general education classes to the greatest extent possible (IDEA, 2019). In the school year 2020–2021, Black students in Connecticut experienced the most disproportionately with respect to learning disorders (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE]; 2022). Eighty percent of students with learning disorders spent their time away from regular classrooms (CSDE, 2022). Despite efforts to reduce disparities, disparities among ethnically and racially diverse students with learning or emotional disorders have continued (Leung, 2021).

The New York State Education Department (2018) created the Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Education Framework. This framework rests on the assumption that systemic inequity is often associated with disadvantages based on linguistic background, gender, skin color, and other characteristics (New York State Education Department, 2018). The framework also builds on the position that the main reason for disparities in special education is teachers' cultural incompetence with respect to responding to diverse students' needs (Leung, 2021). The problem explored in this qualitative phenomenological study was the need to understand the lived

experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021), because their experiences had the potential to provide valuable perspectives.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following definitions, listed in alphabetical order, provide an understanding of the terminology used in this study. Some of the terms used have nonstandard or uncommon definitions. This section defines the terms in accordance with their use in this study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Defining these key terms makes their meaning clear in this study.

***Bias***: Bias is an inclination or preference, either for or against an individual or group, that interferes with impartial judgment (Anti-Defamation League, 2015).

***Dis/ability (spelled with a slash)***: Dis/ability is used in this study against a deficit lens that labels people with disabilities as needing to be fixed (Annamma et al., 2018).

***Disability (spelled without a slash)***: Disability in this study is a legal term derived from the Americans With Disabilities Act for a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (ADA National Network, 2023).

***Disparities***: Disparities are differences or inequalities between individuals or groups in various aspects—such as education, socioeconomic status, and access to resources and services—



resulting from factors of marginalization (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, and geographic location) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]; n.d.).

***Disproportionate representation:*** Disproportionate representation describes a situation in which a student in a racial or ethnic group is more likely than average to be inappropriately identified as having a disability or having specific learning disability (Office of the State Superintendent of Education [OSSE]; n.d.).

***Equity requirements:*** The IDEA (2019) mandates public schools to report three requirements (disproportionate representation, significant discrepancy, and significant disproportionality) to foster equity by addressing substantial inequalities in treatment of racially and ethnically diverse students with disabilities (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021).

***Ethnicity:*** Ethnicity is a socially constructed grouping of people based on culture, tribe, language, national heritage, or religion. Ethnicity is often treated as interchangeable with race or national origin but should be considered as overlapping with these categories rather than identical with them (NEA Center for Social Justice, 2021).

***Explicit bias:*** The U.S. Department of Justice (n.d.) defined explicit bias as the traditional conceptualization of bias. Individuals exhibiting explicit bias are aware of their prejudices and attitudes toward certain groups. Overt racism and racist comments are examples of explicit bias.

***Implicit bias:*** Gordon & Espinoza (2020) defined implicit bias as the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape individuals' responses to particular groups, especially in relation to race, class, and language. Implicit bias operates involuntarily, often without an individual's awareness or intentional control.

***Race:*** Race is a social construct that divides people into groups based on perceived inherited physical differences (American Association of University Women, n.d.).

***Self-contained program:*** A self-contained program is a specialized classroom or educational setting in which students with special needs receive instruction and support within a separate and distinct environment from that of general education (Hallahan et al., 2018).

***Significant discrepancy:*** A significant discrepancy is a situation in which a racially or ethnically diverse student with a disability is more likely than average to experience school disciplinary action, such as suspension or expulsion, as a result of inappropriate policies, procedures, or practices (OSSE, n.d.).

***Significant disproportionality:*** A significant disproportionality is a situation in which a student in a racial or ethnic group is more likely than a student in other racial or ethnic groups to be identified as a student with a disability, identified as a student with a particular disability, placed in a more restrictive setting, or suspended or expelled (OSSE, n.d.).

***Students of color:*** Hammond (2015) defined students of color as students who are culturally and ethnically diverse.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem explored in this qualitative phenomenological study was the need to understand the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). Although the IDEA requires public schools to report three equity requirements in special education for racially and ethnically diverse students (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021), racial inequity for students with special needs has persisted (Jackson et al., 2016; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). In the 2018–2019 school year in Connecticut, Black students were more than 1.5 times as likely as their

non-Black counterparts to receive a label of serious emotional disturbance and more than twice as likely to receive a diagnosis of intellectual disability (CSDE, 2022).

There are multiple, complicated, and often systemic reasons why racially and ethnically diverse students are disproportionately labeled with emotional or learning disorders (Benson & Fiarman, 2019). Such students are more likely than other students to find themselves placed in self-contained programs (Lhamon et al., 2019; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). Despite decades of research, the situation of racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, especially with respect to diagnosis of challenging behaviors, has not significantly improved (Cavendish et al., 2018). Relevant factors may include student characteristics and demographics, teacher race and implicit bias, and level of school culture. However, researchers have not thoroughly explored the intersectionality of these characteristics in grade school (Cavendish et al., 2018).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021). The lived experiences of the teachers were explored to develop an understanding of disparities among those students. Teachers typically have direct and regular interactions with students, allowing them to observe various aspects of students' academic performance, behavior, and social interactions. Teachers' lived experiences based on these interactions had the potential to act as invaluable resources for understanding various aspects of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in special education. This aim

of this study was to conduct six interviews with primary and secondary teachers to explore their lived experiences into special education at one state-approved private special education in Connecticut. It is important to systemically address disparities because no one factor of marginalization is more important than another (Jackson et al., 2016).

### **Research Question and Design**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021). The conceptual and theoretical framework of this study guided the investigation of intersectionality of factors of marginalization, race and ethnicity, and dis/ability. Based on the lived experiences of six teachers, this researcher explored how factors within special education in Connecticut can influence the prevalence of disparities. The following research question guided the study:

What are the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education?

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

Conceptual frameworks provide direction for a researcher's interaction with their research by outlining their knowledge, interests, and values and how these affect their study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). According to Ravitch and Carl, a conceptual framework has three important elements: personal interest, topical research, and a theoretical framework. The elements of the conceptual framework for this study were this researcher's personal interest, the research topic, and intersectionality theory, which was the theoretical framework. This

conceptual framework provided methodological ways of understanding and analyzing the lived experiences of teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding the disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders in special education.

The perspective of this researcher derived from her professional experience of having worked as a teacher of students with special needs and as a cochair of the equity, diversity, and inclusion committee of an institution serving students with special needs in a state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. In addition, this researcher's identity as a member of a marginalized race and as an immigrant to the United States led them to an interpretation looking through an intersectionality lens. This researcher acknowledges the social, historical, institutional, and political factors involved in disparities in special education for racially and ethnically diverse students. The intersectionality of these multiple factors of less privileged status impacts the outcomes of students' lives (Bešić, 2020). A review of existing literature provided the topical research for this study. The themes that emerged from the literature review were equity requirements in the IDEA (2019), disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, causes of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, and educational practices to support racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs.

The intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) formed the theoretical framework for this study. Crenshaw (1991) developed Black feminist criticism as a starting point because doing so allowed construction of a negative effect of the propensity to perceive race and gender as mutually exclusive categories. The researcher examined how a single-axis factor (being Black) dominated antidiscrimination law and affected another factor (being a woman) in feminist theory

(Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1998) stated that discrimination when two or more marginalized elements are combined is greater than the sum of the discrimination against each marginalized group alone. Intersectionality theory also applies to the study of how different social categories—such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and class—interact with colonialism, neoliberalism, geopolitics, and other historical and global influences on form-altering power and oppression relations (Rice et al., 2019).

Intersectionality foregrounds a theoretical position and method of doing empirical research that interrelates categories of social differences, such as disability, racism, class, and gender (Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). Bešić (2020) argued that the different levels of discrimination should form a “unified system that generates discrimination (i.e., oppression)” (p. 114). With intersectionality, such differences may develop oppression, social injustice, and inequality in institutions because intersectionality may affect social status negatively (Atewologun, 2018). Using intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) as the theoretical framework for this study allowed this researcher to explore the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education. The findings of this study could apply to other situations involving disparities, such as school systems, local and federal policies, historical grounds, and biases. In addition, the finding of this study could lead to an understanding of how intersectional variables—such as race, ethnicity, and disability—manifest in the prevalence of disparities in special education for racially and ethnically diverse students.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

Assumptions of qualitative research are foundational beliefs or premises that researchers make about the nature of reality, human behavior, and the research process itself (Patton, 2015). These assumptions guide the design, data collection, and interpretation of qualitative research (Patton, 2015). This researcher expected that results from this study could enhance awareness of the challenges and opportunities faced by racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders in special education. It was also expected that participants could provide valuable lived experiences based on their personal experiences of racially and ethnically diverse students with learning and emotional disorders. Those lived experiences could help to explain the disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. These findings could also lead to development opportunities for equitable education at the district, regional, and state levels.

However, this study did have some limitations. First, the scope of the study was limited to participants from one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. Second, the participants did not have firsthand experience of being marginalized because all participants in this study self-identified as White. The demographics of the participants may not have reflected the general population of students. Third, it is essential to remember that developing good research questions requires understanding other people's lives, which is always an exercise in ethics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study was a need to provide lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers who have worked with racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. This study had the

potential to yield factors explaining why disparities among those students have persisted. Equity requirements in special education are mandatory to be reported in public schools (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021). In addition, researchers have long studied educational disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students (Cavendish et al., 2018). The researchers mentioned that despite those attempts to raise awareness of equity in special education for racially and ethnically diverse students, disparities in special education have persisted.

The significance of this study may influence teachers to address disparities in special education, helping both teachers and students. The findings that emerged from the six semi structured interviews may help existing teachers and schools build awareness and create possible solutions. The beliefs and practices of teachers should take into account understanding of the cultural and historical nature of the disparities and gaps faced by racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (Thorius, 2019). Reduction or elimination of disparities among students with intersections of ability, language, and race requires working on culturally responsive instruction (Thorius et al., 2018). The goal of culturally responsive instruction is to equip and prepare teachers with skills and awareness needed to use strategies that advance school practice (Hammond, 2015).

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 introduced the background of the study, defined terms, stated the problem motivating the study, described the purpose of the study, stated the research question guiding the study, explained the conceptual and theoretical framework, and described the assumptions, limitations, scope, rationale, and significance of the study. The implication of the problem statement is that more research into the phenomenon of racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional disorders or learning disorders should lead to improvements. Acknowledgment of



intersectionality among racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders can advance understanding of disparities among these students. Chapter 2 presents the literature review for this study. Chapter 3 details the methodology used. Chapter 4 analyzes the data collected, and Chapter 5 concludes the study.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem explored in this qualitative phenomenological study was the need to understand the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). The focus of this study consisted of gathering the lived experiences of teachers who work with racially and ethnically diverse students diagnosed with learning or emotional disorders in special education from kindergarten through 12th grade for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the disparities among those students. This researcher aimed to conduct six interviews with teachers at one state approved private special education school in Connecticut to explore their lived experiences into these disparities. It is important to systemically address disparities because no single factor of marginalization—such as race, ethnicity, or disability—is more important than another (Jackson et al., 2016).

To identify interdisciplinary work on disparities in experiences and outcomes among racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders, this researcher reviewed literature from a wide range of disciplines, such as special education law, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, school discipline, culturally responsive teaching, and disparities in special education. The conceptual framework of this study consisted of three constructs: the professional interest of this researcher, the research topic, and the theoretical framework of intersectionality theory. This framework provided methodological ways of understanding and analyzing the lived experiences of teachers.

The IDEA (2019) is a federal law that mandates public schools to provide high-quality educational services and opportunities for students with special needs (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). Special education is specially designed instruction provided at no cost to parents to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities. This instruction can occur in various settings, including classrooms, homes, hospitals, and institutions (Special Education, 2018). Dolmage (2013) stated, “The definition of a normal position for a person in North America is able-bodied, rational-minded, autonomous, upper class, white, male, western European, preferably American, overconfidently heterosexual, right-sized, and so on” (p. 21). This normalism creates segregation for people categorized as abnormal, such as racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (Phuong, 2017). Annamma et al. (2014) argued that special education had incorporated a system for exclusion of racially marginalized groups. Because of this segregation, marginalized students have received inequities in special education (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021).

This literature review consists of five sections. The first section explores the conceptual and theoretical framework, describing the intersectionality of racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs and analyzing the systemic discrimination against those students in educational settings. In this study, this researcher explored disparities through an intersectionality lens from the standpoint of race, ethnicity, and disability. The second section describes the equity requirements of special education set in 2016 amendments to the IDEA. The third section explores evidence of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. The disparities include academic gaps, differences in school discipline rates, and disproportionality among leadership and certified staff. The fourth section discusses the causes of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. The discussion

includes unconscious bias and the diagnosis process in special education. The fifth section reviews educational practice, including ways to potentially improve these disparities.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), a conceptual framework has three important elements: personal interest, topical research, and a theoretical framework. The conceptual framework for this study includes three constructs: the professional interest of this researcher, the current literature, and the theoretical framework of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991). The conceptual framework for this study provided methodological ways of understanding and analyzing the lived experiences of teachers in Connecticut regarding the disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders in special education. This section discusses this study's conceptual framework.

The personal interest of this researcher derived from her professional experience working as a teacher of students with special needs and as cochair of the equity, diversity, and inclusion committee of an institution serving students with special needs in Connecticut. The institution is a state-approved private special education school serving students with diverse disabilities falling into the IDEA's (2019) 13 categories. As cochair of the equity, diversity, and inclusion committee, this researcher has been facilitating professional development, events, and programs for staff and students to recognize the uniqueness of each individual and embrace diverse backgrounds, values, abilities, and beliefs. The mission of the equity, diversity, and inclusion committee has been especially important for the population of this institution because the students have experienced oppression resulting from their intersectional factors (disability, race, and ethnicity).

In addition, this researcher's identity as a member of a marginalized race and as an immigrant to the United States led her to interpretation through an intersectionality lens. This researcher has lived in three different countries and experienced differences in diversity and the disadvantages of being a marginalized person. This researcher acknowledges the social, historical, institutional, and political factors involved in the disparities in special education for racially and ethnically diverse students. This researcher's experiences lie in the intersections of race, ethnicity, dis/ability, and immigration status. These intersectional factors provide the connection between this researcher's own experiences and the experiences of other intersectional factors of marginalization. These multiple elements of less privileged status (intersectionality) impact the outcomes of people's perspectives (Bešić, 2020).

The review of the literature provided the topical research for this study. The themes that emerged from the literature review were the equity requirements in the IDEA (2019), disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, causes of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, and educational practices to support racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. Grounded in intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), the review involved the exploration of evidence, causes, and frameworks for improving educational opportunities for racially and ethnically diverse students with disabilities.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) defined a theoretical framework as the formal theory that explains or connects empirical work; a conceptual framework, on the other hand, is an argument for the importance of, and the methods used in, research. The researchers argued that theoretical frameworks represent a combination or aggregation of formal theories so as to illuminate some aspect of a conceptual framework. Ravitch and Carl wrote that while preexisting theory frames and guides the research process, a researcher's assumptions and tentative hypotheses create a

new theory. Through a focus on race and its intersections with other factors of marginalization, such as ethnicity and disability, the empirical findings of this study rest on a theoretical framework suitable for exploration of the lived experiences of teachers.

The critical legal scholar Crenshaw—who sought to highlight how the treatment of Black women within the law needed to be interpreted, analyzed, and understood through the dual lenses of gender and race discrimination—coined the term “intersectionality” (Atewologun, 2018). Crenshaw (1998) explored two wide categories, women and race, and created one intersectionality. The author found that any proposed explanation that ignored intersectionality would fall short of addressing the specific way Black women are oppressed, because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of the separate experiences of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1998). They postulated that the confluence of each person’s identities mirrors the intersection of overlapping oppressions, and each person perceives social structure differently. The concept of intersectionality provides the perspective and vocabulary necessary to analyze the relationships and interdependencies among social systems and categories (Crenshaw, 1998).

The theory of intersectionality applies to a wide range of social interactions and intricate societal structures (Atewologun, 2018; Rice et al., 2019). It has found wide use in description of the intersections, multiple oppressions, and mutual constitutions found in legal, political, and sociological academic scholarship (Atewologun, 2018). Researchers mainly apply intersectionality theory for studies of individual subjects and their intersectional locations. Moreover, such researchers have drawn attention to the nature and effects of disparities that people and groups suffer because of their social affiliations (Fitchett et al., 2020).

The disproportionate representation of racially and ethnically diverse students yields to analysis through the lens of intersectionality theory (Annamma et al., 2014; Crenshaw, 1991). Applying intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) requires connecting individual experiences with institutional inequities. Furthermore, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) leverages the multidisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, sociology, history, the humanities, and law to better comprehend the experiences of racially and ethnically diverse students by viewing these experiences as sources of strength (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Intersectionality has the potential to provide an understanding of how the interdependence of racism and ableism affect racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs.

It is crucial to examine school and teacher activities, as well as student relationships, through the perspective of intersectionality because special education has historically received criticism for adopting an interventionist and medical-model view of disability (Phuong, 2017). Phuong wrote that according to the medical model of disability, a student with a disability may struggle in school because of an innate impairment that is individual to the student and may be psychological, neurological, or biological. On the other hand, Phuong mentioned that in a social model of disability, the institutional processes at a school that cause labeling of a student as having a disability become the subject of analysis, rather than individual students. These differences also feature in the equity requirements created by the IDEA (2019). The data school districts must collect, according to the requirements, are for children aged 5–21 years in each of seven racial and ethnic groups who have received diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, specific learning disability, emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, or other health impairment (O’Hara & Bollmer, 2021), because those diagnoses can be made more subjectively (IDEA Data Center, 2016).

Intersectionality theory specifically takes into consideration the marginalization experienced by racially and ethnically diverse students with disabilities, and their family members, resulting from the intersection of power and privilege surrounding race and dis/ability (Rausch et al., 2019). The theory allows investigation of how intersectionality and the standpoint of disability critical race theory have contributed to the production of new knowledge (Annamma et al., 2018). The expression and oppression of racially and ethnically diverse students with learning disorders, emotional disturbances, or intellectual disorders may be different from those of White students with visual impairments or deafness. Annamma et al. have provided new possibilities for exploring how patterns of oppression particularly interact with racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs at the fringes of Whiteness and ability.

Considering only one axis—race, ethnicity, or disability—cannot explain the oppression or disadvantage of racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs because it does not effectively address the intersectionality of the factors of oppression (Annamma et al., 2018). Intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1991) links different types of oppression—such as race, ethnicity, and disability—to allow analysis of the frame of racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. Race and dis/ability categories have a significant impact on how racially and ethnically diverse students conduct their lives (Annamma et al., 2014). To comprehend how different social identities—such as race, ethnicity, and dis/ability—interact and establish societal power structures, the concept of intersectionality has evolved into a theoretical research paradigm (Etherington et al., 2020).

Kulkarni et al. (2021) stated that teachers must work with dis/abled scholars and community organizers of color, deliver meaningful, accessible training, and work with teacher candidates to change their attitudes toward disability and race. Kulkarni et al. wrote that



oppressive systems of schooling emphasize the necessity of reconstructing structure to reinvent education. The concepts of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) may provide a basic framework for understanding how racism and ableism are interdependent systems that can guide understanding of how students classified as having disabilities experience further marginalization and face racism-aggravated exclusion in education. Race, racism, and dis/ability have become ingrained in educational relationships, practices, discourses, and institutions, and they have a distinctive and profound impact on racially and ethnically diverse students with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2014). Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) formed the theoretical framework for this study because it allowed exploration of the interconnections and interdependencies between social categories and systems. This researcher's interest in the research topic, the review of existing literature, and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), as the theoretical framework, together formed the conceptual framework for this study.

### **Equity Requirements in the IDEA**

The IDEA (2019) is a law mandating public schools to provide free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation, including special education and related services. More than 7,500,000 eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities received early intervention, special education, and related programs under the IDEA in the 2018–2019 school year (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Early intervention services for those with disabilities (and their families) from birth to age 3 years are provided under IDEA Part C. Under IDEA Part B, children and youth aged 3–21 years receive special education and related services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or reading intervention (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The IDEA (2019) regulations specify 13 qualification categories:

- Specific learning disability includes learning disabilities related to reading (dyslexia), math (dyscalculia), and writing (dysgraphia).
- Speech or language impairment includes difficulties such as stuttering, pronunciation problems, and other expressive language issues.
- Other health impairment includes attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and other medical conditions.
- Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disability mainly affecting a child's social and communication skills.
- Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by below-average intellectual ability and may include poor communication, self-care, and social skills.
- Emotional disturbance includes disorders such as anxiety disorder and schizophrenia.
- Multiple disabilities include more than one disability type.
- Hearing impairment includes difficulties with hearing that do not constitute deafness.
- Orthopedic impairment includes difficulties with physical functioning or bodily control, including cerebral palsy.
- Traumatic brain injury includes disabilities caused by brain injury and physical force.
- Visual impairment includes blindness or eyesight problems.
- Deafness includes a lack of hearing that persists even with hearing aids.
- Deaf-blindness includes co-occurring hearing and visual impairments.

The IDEA (2019) has three requirements for equity: disproportionate representation, significant discrepancy, and significant disproportionality. The goal of the equity requirements is to foster equity by addressing substantial inequalities in the treatment of students of color with disabilities (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021). The required data collection for school districts is for

those aged 5–21 years in each of seven racial and ethnic groups (i.e., Hispanic/Latino, White, Black, Asian, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and two or more races) who have autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, specific learning disability, emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, or other health impairment (O’Hara & Bollmer, 2021). Data collection does not include other disability categories—such as deaf-blindness, deafness, hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, and traumatic brain injury—because those disabilities correspond to objective diagnoses, and determination of eligibility for them is medical in nature (IDEA Data Center, 2016).

The measure of significant discrepancy consists of the percentage of districts that have (a) significant discrepancies, by race or ethnicity, in the rates of suspension (of more than 10 days per school year) and expulsion for children with individualized education programs (IEPs) and (b) policies, procedures, or practices that contribute to such significant discrepancies and do not comply with requirements relating to the development and implementation of IEPs, the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and procedural safeguards (O’Hara & Bollmer, 2021). An IEP for a child with a disability is a written statement developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with the requirements (IDEA, 2019).

The term “significant disproportionality” describes the widespread trend of students of certain racial and ethnic groups being identified for special education, placed in more restrictive educational settings, and disciplined at higher rates than their peers (Aiyedogbon, 2020). Measurement of significant disproportionality determines whether significant disproportionality based on race or ethnicity is occurring with respect to (a) the identification of children as children with disabilities, including in accordance with particular impairments; (b) placement of

children in particular educational settings; and (c) the incidence, duration, and type of disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021).

The regulations can help clarify the differences and similarities among the three equity requirements and enable stakeholders to compare the various equity requirements. The U.S. Department of Education has provided resources relating to methodology, data sources, and reporting considerations for each of the three equity requirements (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021). However, racial disparity in special education has persisted despite amendments made to the IDEA in 1990, 1997, 2004, and 2016, just as racial and socioeconomic segregation has continued (Thorius, 2019). H. Morgan (2020) also stated that policymakers have not carefully considered cultural–historical factors, although federal law has been in place. Some districts have symbolically complied with the disciplinary mandates of the IDEA (2019) and superficially applied them to practice (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al. mentioned that such practices may lead to implementation failures, worsening disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students.

### **Disparities Among Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students With Special Needs**

Racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs have experienced significant disparities in performance and school discipline rates (Aiyedogbon, 2020). In addition, the disproportionality of leadership and teaching staff has negatively influenced racially and ethnically diverse students (Redding, 2019; Thorius, 2019). These students have tended to be assigned to more restrictive educational environments and reprimanded at noticeably higher rates than their peers; this is considered a disparity (Aiyedogbon, 2020). Students in the least restrictive environment possible, such as general education classrooms (inclusive settings), have the best academic outcomes (Nowicki, 2020).

The intersection of race and special education may explain the bias in the educational system—including in assessment, academic, and other policies—for racially and ethnically diverse students to be mistakenly labeled as having emotional or learning disorders. Relevant policies may lead to placement of these students in more restrictive environments than their peers and imposition upon them of harsher disciplinary measures than those imposed on their peers (Annamma et al., 2014, 2018; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). A student may suffer if they are incorrectly classified as needing special education, placed in a constrictive environment, or reprimanded more frequently and harshly than other students (Aiyedogbon, 2020). Performance gaps, disparities in school discipline rates, and disproportionality of leadership and teaching staff are evidence of the disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special education (Annamma et al., 2014).

### **Performance Gaps Among Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students**

The achievement gap, which reflects the tendency of racially and ethnically diverse students to perform on state standardized tests at levels lower than those of their White peers, reinforces deficit thinking about these students, privileges constrained definitions of learning, and places a focus on White-student achievement as the norm (Pak & Parsons, 2020). Annamma et al. (2014) argued that most racially and ethnically diverse students have historically performed worse than their White counterparts. Annamma et al. wrote that even after controlling for socioeconomic factors, these patterns have persisted, and fewer racially marginalized students have been admitted to college because racially and ethnically diverse students have had limited access to curricula such as honors or advanced placement courses.

According to the NCES (2022b), the overall dropout rate for students aged 16–24 years decreased from 7.4% in 2010 to 5.3% in 2020. Although the dropout rate for White students was

5.3 % in 2020, the rate for students of color (Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students) was 7.7 %, and the rate for Hispanic immigrant students (not U.S.-born citizens) was 15% (NCES, 2022b). The graduation rate for White students in the 2018–2019 school year was 89%, while for students of color (Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students) the rate was 79% (NCES, 2022a). Seventy-six percent of students with special needs aged 14–21 years during the 2019–2020 school year graduated with regular high school diplomas, 13% dropped out, and 10% received alternative certificates (NCES, 2022c). The graduation rate for White students with special needs was 79%, while for students of color with special needs the rate was 74%. Although data indicate improvement, disparities have persisted in marginalized groups.

Although other factors need consideration with respect to achievement gaps—such as poverty levels, and communities, parents’ support—Startz (2020) stated that around 90% of racial achievement gaps were unexplained, implying that race could still affect gaps through policy variations both inside and outside the classroom. Researchers have described these gaps not as academic gaps but rather as outcome gaps created systematically by institutions and policies (Annamma et al., 2014; Pak & Parsons, 2020). Some youths may overcome the barriers and oppression they face, but many may not overcome socio-institutional barriers (Annamma, 2013; Annamma et al., 2014).

### **School Discipline Rates for Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students**

Racial differences in discipline exist when Black students are disciplined at considerably higher rates than their White peers; in such a situation, Black students are more likely than their White peers to be viewed as troublesome for the same behavior (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) and Riddle and Sinclair (2019) have empirically demonstrated that teachers’ responses can lead to racial inequities in discipline.

Racially and ethnically diverse students are more likely to have difficult life outcomes as a result of disciplinary procedures, including participation in the criminal justice system (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Riddle and Sinclair argued that the disciplinary disparities between Black and White students across five categories of disciplinary actions (in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, law enforcement referrals, school-related arrests, and expulsions) were linked to racial bias rates at the county level. This pattern also ties in with patterns of overrepresentation in juvenile and adult prisons (Annamma et al., 2014).

In the 2015–2016 academic year, more than 2,700,000 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade were suspended from school for at least 1 day (Lhamon et al., 2019). Black students with disabilities were nearly 3 times more likely to be suspended than White students with disabilities (Lhamon et al., 2019). Lhamon et al. wrote that data have consistently indicated that higher rates of school discipline for racially and ethnically diverse students are due not to misbehavior but rather to structural and systemic problems in the United States. The researchers mentioned that research results from the past several decades have indicated racial differences in the rates of disciplinary actions taken against students.

### **Leadership and Teaching Staff**

The races of school principals, teachers, board members, school psychologists, and other related service professionals have not been representative of the racial makeup of the communities they serve (Annamma et al., 2014). Teachers who are of the same race as their students are more likely than teachers of other races to be aware of the cultural characteristics of their pupils; however, there has been a lack of teachers of color in public schools (H. Morgan, 2019). According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2017–2018 school year about 79% of public school teachers were White, 9% were Hispanic, and 7% were

Black, while only 47% of students were White, and 53% were students of color (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Public schools in Connecticut have also reflected this trend. According to the Connecticut State Department of Education ([CSDE]; 2022), 90% of certified staff were White in the 2020–2021 school year, while 10% were people of color (CSDE, 2022). Figlio (2018) stated that marginalized students often performed better on standardized scores, attended school more often, and were suspended less when they had at least one same-race teacher. Lindsay et al. (2017) also found that exposure to a larger proportion of same-race teachers reduced the likelihood of Black students receiving exclusionary discipline.

The intersectionality of race and disability may create consequences for racism and ableism if White teachers without disabilities consider themselves racially, intellectually, and morally superior to students of color with disabilities (Thorius, 2019). Thorius wrote that the problem with the racial disproportionality among teachers is that many White nondisabled teachers may neither know nor want to try to understand the disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with disabilities resulting from historical and systemic discrimination. Such teachers may misunderstand students' behaviors and cultures and define misunderstood behaviors as problematic (Annamma et al., 2014). The disparities discussed previously are the result of explicit policies over many generations that have prevented racially and ethnically diverse people from accumulating wealth, education, and property while explicitly protecting and increasing support for White people to advance in those areas (Benson & Fiarman, 2019). When people think of an image of those in the middle class with college degrees, those in the image are usually White. Students who see that their teachers and administrators are mostly White may develop unconscious biases regarding normal and preferred school leaders. The common image of normality has created implicit bias (Benson & Fiarman, 2019; Phuong, 2017).



## **Causes of Disparities Among Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students With Special Needs**

Several causes may lead to disparities in performance, school discipline rates, and leadership and certified staff. Understanding the causes of the disparities, whether historical or contemporary, requires a historical and systematic approach (Annamma, 2013; Annamma et al., 2014, 2018). To better understand what racially and emotionally diverse students with special needs face, this section discusses the causes of disparities. The first subsection reviews the root of the disparities, and the second discusses the determination of diagnoses and eligibility.

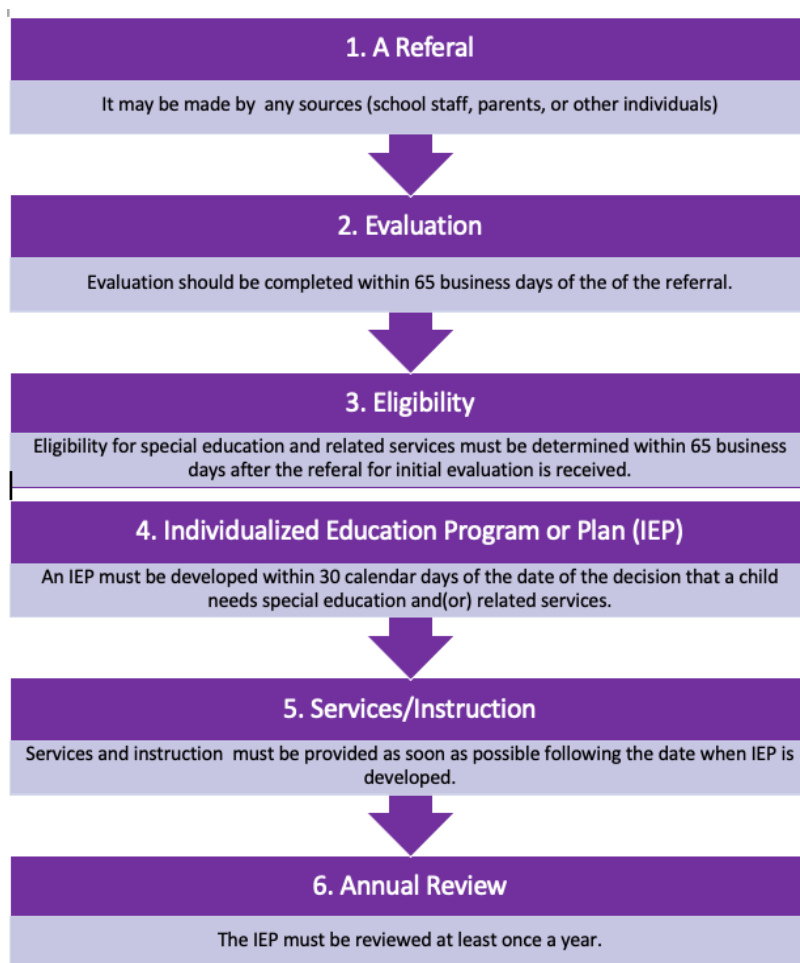
### **Unconscious Bias**

Annamma et al. (2018) stated that people must comprehend how biases might affect teachers' attitudes and actions toward students of color who have experienced several forms of marginalization. Bias is a problem leading to oppression of racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (Annamma et al., 2018; Benson & Fiarman, 2019). Such students and their parents receive treatment different from that received by White students and their parents, both implicitly and explicitly (Benson & Fiarman, 2019). Annamma et al. (2018) argued that destroying a child's self-image, dulling the child's curiosity, and loading the child with low expectations makes the child feel inferior, inadequate, or otherwise unable to make decisions throughout the day. Benson and Fiarman (2019) added that racism had become submerged in humanity's collective unconscious. The researchers stated that the problem of disparities between White and racially and ethnically diverse people is a result of laws and history, which have prohibited Black people from gaining income, education, and property for many generations while protecting and increasing support for White people's advancement in those same areas (Annamma et al., 2018; Benson & Fiarman, 2019).

When students see White teachers and administrators as a norm, those students may develop a preference for this norm, preferring school leaders different from themselves (Benson & Fiarman, 2019). The researchers wrote that when racially and ethnically diverse students do not see themselves as leaders at school, they may develop a sense that those who look like them are unfit for school leadership. Benson and Fiarman stated that at the same time, the racial disproportionality among teachers may lead White students to internalize racial bias. Benson and Fiarman explained that when White students learn within an environment that overwhelmingly represents and affirms their racial identity and excludes the identities of people of other races, they may begin to internalize racial bias, even at early ages.

### **Diagnosis and Implementation in Special Education**

Evaluation is the initial step in the process of determining the eligibility of a child for special education (IDEA, 2019). Determination of Eligibility mentioned that referral for evaluation can occur at the request of parents (or guardians) or a school system. Once a student is identified as eligible to receive special education, an IEP is created so the student can receive appropriate and free education (IDEA, 2019). According to Determination of Eligibility, an annual review occurs of the student's performance and academic services. Figure 1 illustrates the overall process.

**Figure 1***The Process of Determining Eligibility to Receive Special Education*

*Note.* The figure depicts the process described in Determination of Eligibility (IDEA, 2019).

The IDEA (2019) regulations include 13 qualification categories for students aged 3–21 years, in addition to qualification by children aged 3–9 years with developmental delays: autism spectrum disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment (including blindness). Schools must collect data in connection with equity requirements for autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, specific learning disability,

emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, and other health impairment (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021) because the diagnosis of these disabilities is not medical in nature (IDEA Data Center, 2016). Racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs have disproportionately received diagnoses of learning or emotional disorders, which primarily rely on psychologists' professional judgment (Annamma et al., 2014; Skrtic et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

A report for the 2019–2020 school year by the Office of Special Education Programs presented data relating to the characteristics of disproportionality among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Asian students with disabilities were more likely than average to be identified as having autism spectrum disorder or hearing impairment. Black students with disabilities were more likely than average to be identified as having intellectual disability or emotional disturbance, while Hispanic students with disabilities were more likely than average to be identified as having hearing impairment or learning disorders. White students with special needs were in regular classes 80% more than racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. In addition, White students were less likely than other students to be identified as having a learning disorder or intellectual disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Students referred to a special education service generally undergo diagnosis and evaluation for progress by a psychologist or psychiatrist (Lin et al., 2018). Lin et al. mentioned that in 2018, active psychologists' racial and ethnic composition was 84% White people and 16% racially and ethnically marginalized people, while the U.S. population consisted of 61% White people and 39% racially and ethnically marginalized people. These data indicate that the psychology workforce was less diverse than the U.S. population. White evaluators may identify

people of color as disabled more often than they identify White people as disabled because the evaluators may not understand cultural norms (Annamma et al., 2014); as a result, their interpretation may depend on context (Phuong, 2017).

Skrtic et al. (2021) categorized the 13 diagnoses into two statuses: low status and high status. Low status corresponds to a lower ranking in a social hierarchy, and high status corresponds to a higher ranking. The researchers argued that the two statuses had historically formed the basis for segregation, and the disability categorization system and mechanisms sustained racial division in classification. They found that racially and ethnically diverse students were overrepresented in low-status categories such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and learning disorder, but White students were overrepresented in high-status categories such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder. These categories differ from strictly biological categories (e.g., visual impairment), because their construction and diagnoses involve considerable subjective judgment (Annamma et al., 2018; Phuong, 2017; Skrtic et al., 2021). When the number of White students diagnosed with intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and learning disorder started to increase, new diagnoses appeared, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, attention deficit, and autism spectrum disorder. White students thus moved up to the high status, while racially and ethnically diverse students stayed in the low status with diagnoses of intellectual disability, learning disorder, and emotional disturbance (Skrtic et al., 2021). The evaluation and implementation of a student's IEP should involve an understanding of the cultural practices of the student (Annamma et al., 2014; Phuong, 2017; Thorius, 2019). Historically underrepresented parts of the population have had fewer opportunities than the rest of the population to advocate for their needs because of systemic barriers and oppression (Annamma et al., 2014). Unless evaluators and teachers

improve their cultural views to counter their biased lenses, the unfair systemic cycle will repeat, and racially and ethnically diverse students may not receive equitable education (Annamma et al., 2014).

Furthermore, creating a standard of student normality based on White, middle-class, monolingually English-speaking, and average-ability criteria negatively impacts racially and emotionally diverse students with special needs (Phuong, 2017). Such a standard leads to interpretation of bilingual racially and ethnically diverse students as English language learners or disabled students with speech impairments (Cioè-Peña, 2017). The researcher wrote that this persistent misconception rests on anecdotal evidence and reflects the realities of testing more than the abilities of students. Phuong (2017) mentioned that the only language named in the IDEA is English, and the law defines bilingual students (most of whom are immigrants) as students with “limited” English proficiency. Phuong mentioned that use of this definition in a special education policy frame leads to the treatment of limited English proficiency as a problem or challenge and categorizes students with limited English proficiency as disabled.

### **Educational Practices to Support Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students With Special Needs**

Educational practices to support racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs involve embracing culturally responsive teaching, which recognizes the historical disparities faced by these students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Thorius, 2019). This approach uses familiar cultural knowledge to scaffold learning and promote communal orientation, relationships, and social awareness. Collaborating with students to address systemic inequities is crucial (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, frameworks like the New York State Education Department's Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Education Framework (2018)

and the National Education Association's elements of awareness, capacity building, and action (2018) provide a roadmap for creating inclusive and equitable educational environments for all stakeholders.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Teachers should base their beliefs and practices on understanding of the cultural and historical nature of disparities and gaps faced by racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (Thorius, 2019). Hammond (2015) defined culturally responsive teaching as “the process of using familiar cultural information and processes to scaffold learning, emphasizing communal orientation, focusing on relationships, cognitive scaffolding, and critical social awareness” (p. 156). Reduction or elimination of disparities among students at intersections of ability, language, and race requires work on a culturally responsive curriculum (Thorius et al., 2018). The construction of culturally responsive pedagogy accords with ontological strands deeply ingrained in history of special education: culture as static and monolithic, normalization/assimilation, and silence in disability culture (Thorius et al., 2018). Recognizing and boosting the importance of culture for racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs is essential.

Ladson-Billings (1995) created the framework of culturally responsive teaching, stating that culturally responsive teaching would improve academic achievement by holding high, transparent expectations for all students and supporting the development of their academic skills and identities as learners. Teachers should be culturally competent to affirm students’ backgrounds and identify and foster the ability of students to understand and honor others’ cultures (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Hammond (2015) and Ladson-Billings

(1995) affirmed the necessity of partnering with students to identify, analyze, and work to solve systemic inequities in their communities.

### **Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Frameworks**

The New York State Education Department (2018) created the Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Education Framework. It clearly expresses that systemic inequity is often associated with advantages and disadvantages based on linguistic background, gender, skin color, and other characteristics. The framework has four principles: (a) a welcoming and affirming environment; (b) high expectations and rigorous instruction; (c) inclusive curriculum and assessment; and (d) ongoing professional learning. This framework applies to all involved stakeholders: students, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, family and community members, higher education faculty and administrators, and education department policymakers (New York State Education Department, 2018).

The National Education Association ([NEA]; 2018) also provided three framework elements for equity, diversity, and inclusion: awareness, capacity building, and action. The goal of awareness is to develop and strengthen collective awareness and understanding of the causes and impacts of systemic (institutional and structural) racism in education, the necessity for racial justice, and the centrality of racial justice in achieving the NEA’s mission. The goal of capacity building is to equip and prepare NEA members and leaders with skills needed to take action to advance racial justice (NEA, 2018). The goal of action, according to the NEA, is to equip its members and stakeholders with tools and skills needed to advocate, organize, and mobilize to disrupt institutional racism and advance racial justice in education.



## Summary

The focus of this literature review was exploration of the experiences of, and challenges faced by, racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. Several key themes emerged from the reviewed work, highlighting the unique intersection of race, ethnicity, and dis/ability in special education. The review of the literature revealed disparities and disproportionalities, including overrepresentation of racially and ethnically diverse students among students identified as having emotional and learning disorders. Systemic disproportionality increases vulnerability of racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (Annamma et al., 2014). Such students suffer from the effects of multiple factors of marginalization coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate nonintersectional contexts, shaping, and ultimately limiting, the opportunities for meaningful intervention on their behalf (Crenshaw, 1991). The theoretical framework, intersectionality theory, sheds light on the compound disadvantages experienced by racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs, highlighting the intricate intersection of their identities.

This chapter revealed that evidence of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs exists in many areas, especially with regard to performance, school discipline rates, and lack of certified staff of color. Culturally sensitive frameworks, unconscious bias, systemic discrimination, and the process of diagnosis require evaluation to remove barriers to racially and ethnically diverse students and promote equity opportunities. The disparities discussed highlight the interconnectedness between conceptions of disability and issues of race and ethnicity, which various social categories influence. It is consequently crucial to take sociohistorical contexts into account when examining these concepts, as discussed in the literature review. Teachers and decision makers must recognize the severity of the substantial

disparities that exist for students of all races and ethnicities and take steps to address and eliminate these disparities (Aiyedogbon, 2020). Chapter 3 details the methodology used in this study. Chapter 4 analyzes the data, and Chapter 5 concludes the study.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The problem explored in this qualitative phenomenological study was the need to understand the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). Although the IDEA (2019) requires public schools to report on three equity requirements in special education for racially and ethnically diverse students, racial inequity for students with special needs has persisted (Jackson et al., 2016; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). In Connecticut in the 2018–2019 school year, Black students were more than 1.5 times as likely to be labeled with serious emotional disturbance as their non-Black counterparts and more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with intellectual disability (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE]; 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021). The contributing factors may include student characteristics and demographics, teacher race and implicit bias, and school-level culture (P. Morgan et al., 2017). But researchers have not thoroughly explored the intersectionality of race and ethnicity with disabilities in grade school (Bešić, 2020; Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). The lived experiences of teachers had the potential to provide important understanding of the process of referral for assessment of qualification to receive an IEP and other factors, such as biases and environment.

This researcher conducted six interviews with participants to explore their lived experiences. The following research question guided the study:

What are the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education?

This researcher analyzed the lived experiences of teachers to discover connections between the factors and variables in the individual context. This chapter describes the methodology of the study, including site information, sampling method, data collection, data analysis, limitations, ethical issues, and trustworthiness.

### **Site Information and Demographics**

The site was a state-approved private special education school for kindergarten through 12th grade in Connecticut. To help provide confidentiality, the pseudonym “Maplewood Academy” was used to refer to this site in this study. According to EdSight (CSDE, 2022), the CSDE’s data portal, there were 86 state-approved private special education schools in Connecticut at the time of the study. In addition to the state-approved private schools, 92 districts ran self-contained programs as alternative programs for special education. To become and run a state-approved institution for special education, an institution had to develop an education program meeting CSDE guidelines, establish a legal entity (such as a limited-liability company), create governing policies and procedures, meet facility requirements set by CSDE (such as provision of adequate classroom space and appropriate equipment and compliance with building codes), and hire qualified staff meeting the CSDE’s requirements. Once a site was approved, the CSDE would visit periodically to monitor compliance (CSDE, n.d.-b).

According to Maplewood Academy's website, the school provided a state-approved academic curriculum, including language arts, math, science, social studies, music, art, health, and physical education classes. State-certified teachers taught the classes, which had a 4:1 student to classroom-staff ratio. The teachers were also trained in behavioral treatment programs, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports. Parents or guardians could send their children with special needs to a state-approved private school for special education either by referral from their district or based on their own request (CSDE, 2021). The site was a self-contained program in Connecticut and served racially and ethnically diverse students.

### **Participants and Sampling Method**

This researcher sent a letter to Mrs. Taylors (a pseudonym), director of Maplewood Academy, to request permission to conduct interviews (Appendix A). Once the leader of Maplewood Academy and the University of New England's Institutional Review Board granted approval to conduct the study (Appendix B), this researcher sent a recruitment email with the participation information sheet (Appendix C) to Mrs. Taylors and Mrs. Garry (a pseudonym), an assistant director of Maplewood Academy, who forwarded the email to potential participants.

An individual met the criteria for participation if they:

- were over 18 years old;
  - were employed as a teacher in Connecticut;
  - were teaching students with special needs in Connecticut, either as a primary classroom teacher or as a teacher of an elective class such as music, art, or physical education;
  - had at least 3 years of experience teaching students with special needs in Connecticut;
- and

- were employed at Maplewood Academy.

Interested participants were asked to reach out to this researcher through a University of New England email address provided in the recruitment email (Appendix A) and on the participant information sheet (Appendix C). This researcher chose to interview the first six participants who self-identified as meeting the criteria and reached out to this researcher. A master list of all participants was created that included personal information, such as names, email addresses, and other contact information. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The master list was destroyed after member checking was complete.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

Establishing the accuracy of an instrument how to collect data requires the use of a research process (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This researcher used a qualitative methodology to investigate the lived experiences of teachers working with racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in a state-approved private special education school. The recruitment process began with the sending of a letter requesting permission to conduct interviews (Appendix A) via email to 10 state-approved special education schools, both public and private, in Connecticut. Mrs. Taylors, director of Maplewood Academy, promptly responded, granting permission to conduct the interviews at her school. Because state-approved private special education schools serve relatively few students, the director of such a school represents their school directly without the oversight of a district superintendent (CSDE, n.d.-a). This school was then selected as the site for this study. Once the leaders of the school and the University of New England's Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct the study (Appendix B), this researcher sent a recruitment email with the participation information sheet (Appendix C) to Mrs. Taylors and Mrs. Garry, who forwarded the email to potential

participants. The letter describes how to contact this researcher, the research topic, and the procedure of the interview. The email was sent after 7 calendar days if fewer than six teachers responded. Once participants responded, they were offered possible interview times. The recruitment process remained open until this researcher obtained six eligible participants. Participants were selected on a first-come, first-served basis as they responded, and this researcher maintained a master list of eligible participants that included their identifiable information, such as names and email addresses, and their assigned pseudonyms. This master list was destroyed after the completion of the validation of the transcripts. A letter was sent to one potential participant, informing her that the study was closed after six potential participants had volunteered (Appendix A).

The data for this study were gathered from semi structured interviews (Appendix D) of six participants. A pilot interview was conducted before the semi structured interviews to test the process and indicate the need for any revisions of the interview questions (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The participant for the pilot interview was a teacher with whom this researcher has worked. The same criteria, interview questions, interview script, and guide (Appendix E) to be used with the anticipated participants were used with her. The interview questions were modified in response to feedback from the pilot interview. The pilot interview provided an opportunity to assess the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the initial interview questions.

Semi structured interviews are the main method used to collect data about the lived experiences of teachers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This researcher used Zoom to conduct interviews with six participants. This researcher emailed a secure link to each participant for their Zoom interview after setting a time for the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 min.

Before each interview began, this researcher went over the participant information sheet (Appendix C) with the participant. The participant verbally agreed to participate in the study after review of the participation information sheet. This researcher used the same script and guide for conducting every interview (Appendix E). Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and the school. Each participant was given the option to leave their camera on or not during the interview, while this researcher had her camera on in a secure location. The participants had the right to skip or not answer questions. They could stop and leave the interview at any time without penalty; in that case, any data collected from the participant would be destroyed. Every participant completed their interview.

The audio of the interviews was recorded and then transcribed verbatim via Zoom's audio transcription function. Each participant's transcript was sent to the participant so that they could review it for accuracy and edit or delete their responses. Member checking can validate accuracy, confirm interpretation, and enhance credibility (Creswell, 2020). Creswell wrote that involving participants in the process allowed their feedback and input to contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data, strengthening the validity and trustworthiness of the research outcomes.

Each participant had 5 calendar days to review their transcript. If this researcher did not hear back from a participant on Calendar Day 6, she assumed that the participant had no comments and assumed the transcript to be accurate. Once member checking to validate the transcripts was complete, the recordings of the Zoom interviews were destroyed. Once all transcripts were verified by the participants, the master list of personal information was destroyed.



Participants were also able to withdraw from the study at any time until the interviews were complete and the master list was destroyed. If a participant had withdrawn from the study, any data collected from that participant would have been destroyed. Every participant completed their interview. All other study data (including deidentified transcripts) will be retained for 3 years after completion of the study and then destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis changes data into meaningful findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell wrote that data analysis is a complex procedure that involves moving back and forth between concrete data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, and between description and interpretation. Data collection for this research followed the five steps recommended by Creswell (2020). First, transcripts were thoroughly read by this researcher, and member checking was conducted. Second, the transcripts were divided into segments of information. Third, the segments of information were labeled with codes. Fourth, the codes were cleaned by reducing their overlap and redundancy. Fifth, the codes were assigned to themes.

The raw data from the interview transcripts were reviewed for coding and emergent themes. Saldaña (2016) defined a code as a word or phrase representing the core essence of qualitative research. Saldaña wrote that frequent words or short phrases become patterns. Patterns are trustworthy evidence for the findings. Coding requires a researcher's analytic lens (Saldaña, 2016) and makes for easy retrieval of specific data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The included patterns derive from the similarities, differences, frequencies, sequences, correspondences, and causations of the codes (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña mentioned that researchers need specific coding lenses, filters, and perspectives to create meaningful patterns.

The web-based software Atlas.ti provided a dedicated space for creating, managing, and organizing codes within the project (Atlas.ti., n.d.). Using this software, researchers can group codes, hierarchically organize codes, and link codes to specific segments of data. Researchers can access and work with the codes directly within Atlas.ti interface (Atlas.ti., n.d.). This researcher imported the interview transcripts and notes into an Atlas.ti project. This researcher reviewed codes created by the software and created new codes or categories representing themes, concepts, or ideas. These codes were applied to specific sections or segments of the transcripts.

Memos were created as notes or annotations that could be linked to specific codes or data segments. Segments and data relevant to specific codes or combinations of codes could easily be retrieved in this software. The coded data were explored using various visualization tools, such as charts, matrices, and network diagrams. These visualization tools helped with analyzing patterns, relationships, and connections within the data.

A journal was kept throughout the analysis process to help identify any emergent codes and potential themes. The codes were categorized into specific themes based on this study's conceptual and theoretical framework. For validity and reliability, each interview transcript and its codes were compared with the other transcripts and their codes. For example, an interview could be checked against other interviews. These multiple checkpoints increased the credibility and validity of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues**

Limitations may have affected this study and the generalization of its findings. Limitations may be related to factors researchers have little or no control over: "Some typical limitations include population, sample size, regional and cultural differences, constraints associated with method design, and response rate" (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019, p. 154). For instance,

participants may not be entirely truthful during interviews because they feel they should act in a particular way (Creswell, 2020). This study was exploratory and nonexperimental in design. The open-ended nature of the semi structured interviews (Appendix D) allowed richer qualitative discovery and thematic analysis than this researcher would have predicted to be possible based on the small sample.

Engagement in diverse experiences and exposure to varied environments diminish biases effectively (Ben et al., 2020). This researcher has had substantial experience with equity, diversity, and inclusion. Further, this researcher has lived in three different countries, completed multiple professional developments, and led a committee for equity, diversity, and inclusion. At the time of the study, this researcher was a devoted teacher, cochair of an equity, diversity, and inclusion committee, and treasurer/director of a nonprofit organization serving a marginalized culture and language. Those experiences could have mitigated biases and addressed limitations during semi structured interviewing.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations were encountered in this study. The first limitation was that the scope of the study was limited to participants at one state-approved private special education school from Connecticut. The second limitation was that most teachers have not experienced racial diversity and its intersectionality firsthand because of their racial or ethnic identities. The demographics of the participants may therefore not have reflected the general population of students. The third limitation was the sampling method. The six participants for this study may not have represented the entire population with respect to factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and teaching experience. The small sample may not have adequately represented the diversity of the population (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The fourth limitation was that the participants may have felt

uncomfortable or hesitant to answer certain questions, leading them to provide socially acceptable responses rather than responses reflecting their genuine thoughts or experiences (Patten, 2017).

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations clarify the scope of research and set the boundaries of a study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The delimitations of this study included the narrow scope of the participant selection process. First, every participant was over 18 years old. Second, every participant was employed as a teacher in Connecticut and taught students with special needs in Connecticut, either as a primary classroom teacher or as a teacher of an elective class such as music, art, or physical education. Third, every participant had at least 3 years of experience teaching students with special needs in Connecticut. Fourth, every participant was employed at Maplewood Academy, a state-approved private special education school. The content of the interview questions (and the research question) was confined to special education, especially the diagnosis of emotional disturbances or learning disorders. These boundaries allowed this researcher to reach meaningful conclusions about disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students. The goal of qualitative research is to facilitate comparisons and conclusions based on similarities among different study elements (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Ethical Issues**

This study was conducted ethically with careful consideration of the participants' values, beliefs, experiences, confidence, and trust. This study adhered to the ethical principles and guidelines for research involving human subjects described by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979). The commission described three principles pertaining to ethical concerns: respect for persons, beneficence, and

justice. By adhering to these principles, this researcher aimed to conduct research in an ethical manner, respecting the rights and well-being of the participants. This researcher prioritized the participants' values and experiences while striving to ensure that the research process was fair and respectful to all involved.

### ***Respect for Persons***

Respect for persons involves treating individuals as autonomous agents, and persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Each potential participant received a participant information sheet (Appendix C), and this researcher went over the sheet with each participant before they verbally agreed to participate in the study. The participant information sheet outlines information about this study, so participants were able to make informed decisions about participation in the study. At the start of each interview, the participant was provided with adequate notice and assurance that their participation was voluntary and would not place them at undue risk. Participants could end their interviews at any time without fear of ramifications or judgment. If a participant had decided to end their interview, the recording of their interview and all accompanying information would have been destroyed. Participants received their transcripts and could add or delete information during member checking. Member checking can empower participants by involving them as active collaborators in the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

### ***Beneficence***

The goal of beneficence is to maximize benefits and minimize possible harms (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). There was a very minimal risk associated with protecting confidentiality in this study.

Mechanisms were in place to protect all participants' confidentiality, thus minimizing the risk of a breach of confidentiality. For example, all electronic notes and documents were kept on this researcher's password-protected computer. In addition, when participants shared their lived experiences during interviews, there was a risk that uncomfortable questions could arise. These uncomfortable questions could have impacted participants' responses or desire to participate. However, the findings of this study may positively influence the participants to address disparities in special education, helping them and students.

### ***Justice***

Justice is the "sense of fairness in the distribution of what is deserved" (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 6). All qualified participants from the approved site received the recruitment email asking for participants and outlining the purpose of the study and conditions for consent. Every participant had the same opportunity to take part and answered the same probing interview questions to share their experiences and lived experiences. Each participant had 5 calendar days to review and accept the accuracy of the transcript of their interview. If a participant did not email this researcher an updated transcript on calendar day 6, she determined the transcript was accurate and began coding. Benefits and burdens should be equal and distributed to each person according to their need, effort, societal contribution, and merit (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of data is related to the reliability of the researchers who gather and analyze the data and the researchers' competence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This section establishes the trustworthiness of the study, which encompasses the accuracy of the research,

data, and findings. Trustworthiness of this study is based on its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. When conducting qualitative research, establishing reliability is essential (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Credibility**

In qualitative research, credibility is a factor in the research process that establishes the accuracy of the research (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The purpose, statement of the problem, research design, methods, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks must align to increase credibility (Creswell, 2020). Multiple checkpoints were used in this study, which also increased credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For example, this researcher compared all the interview transcripts to each other. Because member checking is an important way to identify misinterpretation of the perspectives of participants and the meaning of what participants say and do (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), the participants were provided with their interview transcripts so they could check the transcripts' accuracy.

Triangulation of data was used to validate and establish credibility of the findings and avoid bias. Triangulation should involve the use of different sources and incorporation of multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2020). This researcher collected data through semi structured interviews. The participants were teachers who provided multiple perspectives. The audio of the interviews was recorded and then transcribed verbatim via Zoom's audio transcription function. This recording and transcription were a condition of participation in the study. The transcripts were sent to the participants so they could review the transcripts for accuracy and edit or delete their responses. This process should have reduced any bias of this researcher, as should the journaling this researcher carried out before and after each interview (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Every participant had the same opportunity to take part and answered the same interview questions to share their experiences and lived experiences. Each participant had 5 calendar days to reply to the recruitment email. Also, all participants had equal time to review and accept the accuracy of their interview transcripts. To enhance credibility, it is essential to maintain consistency in the data analysis and coding process across all participants (Creswell, 2020). The same methodology and techniques were used to analyze the collected data for every participant.

### **Transferability**

The term transferability refers to how well findings apply to different situations or circumstances with comparable characteristics (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transferability is directly related to external validity or generalizability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The findings of this study may be positively applicable to address disparities in special education. They may also imply development opportunities for equitable education at the district, regional, and state levels. They findings may transfer to different grade levels from kindergarten through 12th grade. The outcomes of this study have the potential to contribute to the advancement of knowledge, inform educational practices, and positively impact the educational community in practical ways. This researcher aimed to offer comprehensive lived experiences and clear details in the findings so that teachers can determine whether to apply the findings in their own teaching.

### **Dependability**

This research study relied on accurate interview data from teachers employed at Maplewood Academy. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were sent to participants for member checking. The results should be consistent with the data collected and therefore dependable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To achieve dependability, the procedure and methods for data collection were clearly defined. The questions for the semi structured



interviews were related to the research question. To ensure dependability of the study, this researcher maintained a comprehensive record of decisions made, steps taken, and the rationale underlying them. Such a record, often referred to as an “audit trail,” enables others to understand, replicate, and verify a research process (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña wrote that by providing transparency and traceability, the audit trail enhances the overall dependability of a study because it allows for evaluation and validation of the research procedures and findings by external parties.

### **Confirmability**

Two goals of confirmability are to acknowledge and explore the ways a researcher’s biases and prejudices map onto their interpretations of data and to mediate those possibilities through structured reflexivity processes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ravitch and Carl mentioned that to avoid biases and prejudices, researchers must check themselves and have others check them in systematic and ongoing ways throughout all research states. This researcher took detailed notes during each interview, observing and considering the participant’s nonverbal cues as they responded to questions. Each participant verified the accuracy of the transcript of their interview. To avoid bias, this researcher used bracketing throughout this study. Bracketing is the process of setting aside preconceived notions, biases, and assumptions researchers may have about a topic (Creswell, 2020). This researcher revisited the bracketing process by carefully examining what was grounded solely in the data and participants’ experiences. This process included seeking feedback and engaging in discussion with colleagues.

### **Summary**

Through this qualitative phenomenological study, this researcher explored the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education

school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021). A pilot interview, six interviews, and analysis of the data gathered from the interviews enabled not only exploration, documentation, and description of the participants' actual experiences but also interpretation of the data to yield deeper knowledge of their experiences, insights, and perceptions. The chosen site for this study was a state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. Each of the participants was a teacher at least 18 years of age employed in Connecticut who taught students with special needs (either as a primary classroom teacher or as a teacher of an elective class such as music, art, or physical education), had at least 3 years' experience teaching students with special needs in Connecticut, and was employed at Maplewood Academy.

By using qualitative semi structured interviews, this researcher aimed to delve deeply into the experiences, insights, and perspectives of the participants, allowing rich and nuanced data to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders. After obtaining permission from Mrs. Taylors via email to recruit participants, teachers were recruited for interviews on Zoom. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed for codes and themes using Atlas.ti. Possible limitations related to population, sample size, regional and cultural differences, constraints associated with the methods and design, and response rate (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The study incorporated careful consideration of ethical concerns. Measures were taken to ensure voluntary participation, allowing participants to end interviews at any point. The semi structured interview approach was designed to encourage personal reflection by participants.

To maintain fairness and equality, consistent procedures were followed in all aspects of the study, including recruitment, interviewing, and providing participants with adequate time (5 calendar days) to review transcripts. These ethical safeguards were in place to prioritize the well-being and rights of all participants in the study. The design of this study was carefully crafted to ensure trustworthiness and to deliver meaningful and valuable insights for schools, educators, and students in the future. By employing rigorous methods and adhering to best practices in research, this researcher aimed to produce reliable and credible findings. The outcomes of this study have the potential to contribute to the advancement of knowledge, inform educational practices, and positively impact the educational community in practical ways. The next chapter presents the results and findings of this study.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021). Six participants who met this study's criteria participated in the study. Primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut were interviewed via Zoom to understand their lived experiences regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). The conceptual and theoretical frameworks for this study guided consideration of the intersectionality of factors of marginalization: race/ethnicity and dis/ability. Based on the lived experiences of six teachers, this researcher explored how factors within special education at one state-approved private special education in Connecticut could influence the prevalence of disparities.

The following research question guided the study:

What are the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education?

This chapter begins with an overview of the data collection process. It then examines the themes that emerged from the collected data. The chapter concludes with a summary of its key points.

### **Analysis Method**

Audio and transcript data for the interviews were collected and recorded using Zoom. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant before their interview was recorded. Each

interview lasted 30–60 minutes. The audio of each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim using Zoom’s audio transcription function. The transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking. After member checking, the interview data were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti.

The implementation of semi structured interviews and open-ended questions allowed participants to communicate in a conversational manner, enabling them to delve deeply into their personal experiences, insights, and perceptions of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students in special education, especially those with emotional and learning disorders. Atlas.ti initially created over 400 codes. Saldaña (2016) stated that a code in qualitative research can be described as a commonly used word or brief phrase that symbolically represents and encompasses the core, prominent, meaningful, or emotionally resonant aspects of the research data. Frequent words or short phrases become patterns. The patterns are trustworthy evidence for the findings (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña wrote that patterns derive from the similarities, differences, frequencies, sequences, correspondences, and causations of the codes. After careful review, this researcher reduced the number of codes to 26.

Data collection for this research followed the five steps recommended by Creswell (2020). First, transcripts were thoroughly read by this researcher, and member checking was conducted. Second, the transcripts were divided into segments of information. Third, the segments of information were labeled with codes. Fourth, the codes were cleaned by reducing their overlap and redundancy. Fifth, the codes were assigned to themes.

During the data-clustering and code-mapping process, the codes were meticulously reviewed, modified, and augmented with new codes. This researcher ensured the accuracy of the findings by cross-referencing them with the theoretical framework and existing literature. To

enhance the reliability of the results, triangulation was employed to confirm the alignment of the findings with the concepts and theories discussed in the literature review. This researcher established transferability and credibility through participants' lived experiences, which yielded data that validated the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, 1998) and the conceptual framework (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Presentation of Results and Findings**

The semi structured interviews of six participants were completed in July 2023. All participants were employed as special education teachers in a state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. The participants met the requirements listed on the participation information sheet (Appendix C). The participants' experience of teaching students with special needs ranged from 3 to 40 years.

The participants' teaching grades ranged from preschool to transition programs (after high school), and the subjects taught were English, social studies, civics, math, and history. Three participants self-identified as male, and the other three participants self-identified as female. Four participants mentioned that they had embarked on their teaching careers from a young age. Three participants expressed genuine satisfaction in their profession because of the fulfillment of helping others. Sean stated that "I really started to feel I have a chance to make an impact. I can help students and I can help them have a more positive experience with education." All participants self-identified as White with European heritage. Table 1 lists the participants' demographics.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant <sup>a</sup>	Teaching experience (years)	Teaching levels	Teaching subjects
Peter	>40	Secondary	Vocational education, civics, science
Sean	23	Secondary	English
Mike	10	Primary, secondary	History
Cindy	8	Primary, secondary	English, social studies
Kate	20	Primary, secondary	Social studies
Rachel	3	Secondary	Math

*Note.* Every participant self-identified as White with respect to race and ethnicity. The participants appear in the table in the order their interviews occurred. <sup>a</sup> Pseudonym.

**Thematic Analysis of Interview Data**

Analysis of the six interviews yielded four distinct themes: Theme 1 was the existence of disparities, Theme 2 was causes of disparities, Theme 3 was support for and engagement with students, and Theme 4 was empowering and fostering school settings. Figure 2 summarizes the themes and subthemes that emerged from coding. Theme 1 related to whether disparities existed among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education. Theme 2 related to the reasons behind these disparities. Theme 3 involved strategies to support these students. About Theme 4, participants discussed how schools can address disparities.

**Figure 2**

*The Four Themes and Corresponding Subthemes That Emerged From Coding*



*Note.* This figure illustrates the organization of the four themes and their corresponding subthemes.

### **Theme 1: The Existence of Disparities**

The first theme was the existence of disparities. The participants acknowledged the existence of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in special education. However, their perspectives varied concerning the underlying causes of these disparities. In addition to recognizing disparities, they acknowledged the importance of achieving educational equity. Two subthemes emerged in relation to Theme 1: (a) importance of equity and diversity and (b) disparities. The subsections that follow discuss these subthemes.



### *Importance of Equity and Diversity*

The participants discussed equity and diversity in various degrees and from various perspectives throughout the interviews. Peter described educational equity as follows:

All people, all genders, all races, and all that stuff. I firmly believe that everybody needs to be treated fairly. ... I just think that that's part of my philosophy in the way I do things.

We want to make it fair for everybody and I think that schools should work on whatever the disparities are.

He emphasized a strong commitment to fairness and equity for all individuals, irrespective of their race or background.

Cindy emphasized the importance of providing the same opportunities and resources to her students that any other student would receive: "What we need to do is to make sure our students are receiving equal access to what any other students would receive. They, you know, need to access their education [equally]. My job is to provide them with that access." Rachel explained the effort of equity: "We try to meet [students'] needs where they're at because, obviously, they don't have all the necessary resources, support, etc." Her comments were similar to Cindy's.

Kate explained equity in terms of the visibility of diverse role models at school:

There could be a more diverse group of role models for kids in the schools and teaching positions and positions of power, especially in diverse schools, so that the kids could see that because they need to see more hope in the world and feel less like minorities.

On the other hand, Mike discussed the school's actions in connection with equity differently: "I do think we do a really good job, treating all the kids equally." The participants acknowledged the importance of equity and diversity, although their perceptions varied.

In connection with the subtheme of the importance of equity and diversity, the participants discussed equity and diversity from various angles and perspectives. Peter used the word “fairly,” but Cindy and Mike used “equally.” This illustrated nuances in their approaches to defining and articulating equity. Despite perceptual variations, the participants collectively recognized the significance of equity and diversity.

### *Disparities*

In relation to the subtheme of disparities, the participants shared their perspectives regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students. Kate provided intense answers to questions about disparities among racially and ethnically students with emotional or learning disorders. Kate’s responses reflected her concerns and observations about the lack of service for students of color:

I feel the students who need the support who are receiving it are more often not the students who are Black. Why isn’t [the student] going to have the service? I do think that it’s a racial discrepancy. I know that students [of color] are often overidentified, just based on what I’ve read, especially when it comes to learning disabilities.

Rachel’s responses reflected her observations and concerns about racial disparities in access to special education and educational resources. Rachel explained, “A White family, whose children may require special education, has enrolled their kids in a school so they can receive appropriate service at an earlier stage.” However, she pointed out that students from marginalized backgrounds, who may not live in affluent communities or have the same financial resources as White students, might not have the same opportunities. Rachel continued, “Minority families don’t have as much money as other families do. We shouldn’t witness such a

[socioeconomic] disparity among minorities, like the racial aspect in certain topics that my [students] discuss.”

On the other hand, Cindy’s responses reflected her awareness of the challenges faced by racially and ethnically diverse students in the education system. She acknowledged that some students no longer received services within their districts for unclear reasons. An observation of Cindy’s about more racially and ethnically diverse students coming through Maplewood Academy suggested a potential disparity in access to services:

The district has decided that the students, for whatever reason, can no longer be serviced in the district. So, I would say we definitely see more students of color come through the program. I think that it has to be a conscious effort. It starts with diagnosis like, why are we diagnosing the student so?

Peter made a similar observation about disparities; however, he emphasized the severity of the issue rather than just the quantity of racially and ethnically diverse students:

I think that there are more students who are diagnosed with those learning disorders and those learning disabilities because they are more Black students. I don’t think that there has been any more or any less [since I started teaching]. But I do think it’s more of the severity.

Peter’s observations indicated an awareness of potential disparities in the way learning disorders are identified and addressed, particularly for students from diverse racial backgrounds.

Sean raised important concerns about students who receive less attention, particularly racially and ethnically diverse students. Sean said, “I’ve noticed more students of color being put into special education for behavioral problems slash learning disabilities that more or less have.”

His observation about a potential association between students' need of support and race prompts critical reflections on equity and access to resources. Sean continued:

I think that all the measures are good and moving forward the whole system at times. But [execution of the measures] is sometimes very rough instruments and choppily done. It is not always executed with fidelity or with insight into the need for adaptation.

On the other hand, Mike also believed there were disparities, but he stated that disparities were not primarily based on race or ethnicity; instead, he attributed them to differences in socioeconomic background. He explained, "In my opinion there is not much disparity [in race or ethnicity]. What I have noticed, though, is that for the most part, my students probably do come from a lower economic background." Mike believed that disparities were more about economic background than race or ethnicity, and he mainly noticed that his students often came from lower income households.

With regard to the subtheme of disparities the participants observed disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students diagnosed with learning or emotional disorders in special education. But their observations of the causes of the disparities varied across a range of factors, including socioeconomic conditions, misdiagnosis, and degree of severity. With regard to Theme 1—the existence of disparities—the participants emphasized the importance of equity and inclusion along with their observations regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students. Their discussions led to the identification of two subthemes: (a) the importance of equity and diversity and (b) disparities.

## **Theme 2: Causes of Disparities**

The participants shared their lived experiences about the causes of disparities. They identified causes contributing to the disparities observed among racially and ethnically diverse

students in special education. Cindy said, “We definitely see more students of color come through [our] program. I think that it has to be a conscious effort.” From the participants’ shared lived experiences, Theme 2—causes of disparities—emerged. Six subthemes emerged in connection with Theme 2: improper diagnoses, lack of parental advocacy, demographics of leadership, socioeconomic status, lack of awareness, and improper policy application.

### *Improper Diagnoses*

With regard to improper diagnoses, the participants shared their concerns about diagnoses and the potential implications of those concerns for educational equity. These perspectives collectively shed light on the necessity of considering cultural awareness when addressing disparities. Cindy questioned whether disparities were due to diagnosis. She raised essential questions about the reasons behind student diagnoses, specifically focusing on cultural differences affecting students’ reading and comprehension abilities. Cindy explained:

It starts with diagnoses. Why are we diagnosing the students? Are they not able to read and comprehend the material? Or are they not able to understand and connect with the material? [Is it] because of our cultural differences that the students do not understand the material?

Kate also mentioned the need for a thorough and unbiased evaluation process to ensure equitable access regardless of racial or ethnic background. She said:

The school district [where I worked] had a very small population of students who were African American, and I noticed at the time that there was some overidentification of minority students who were also qualified for services. There was an overidentification of [minority] students with learning disabilities.

Sean also observed a concerning trend of more students of color being placed in special education because of behavioral problems and learning gaps rather than true learning disabilities. He noted that academic gaps and early behavioral issues contributed to this occurrence: “More often the students [of color] have a learning disability, in other words, academic gaps. They can’t read. And they act out at younger grades. So, they get put into a special education classroom more often.”

Cindy’s focus on cultural differences and Kate’s call for impartial evaluation raised questions about the diagnosis process. Sean was also concerned about placing students in special education because of academic gaps and behavioral issues. Their lived experiences exposed factors that might contribute to disparities in special education placements. These participants also emphasized the need for more inclusive and impartial evaluations.

### ***Lack of Parental Advocacy***

The parents of a child with special needs play a pivotal role in the creation of an Individualized Education Program for their child by providing valuable lived experiences, collaborating with the education team, setting goals, advocating for appropriate services and accommodations, and ensuring legal compliance (illustrated in Figure 1). Kate acknowledged the historical context and social factors that may have contributed to overidentification, such as mothers being less likely to advocate for services. Kate explained:

We [the teachers] continuously strive to enhance educational support, especially for those students whose mothers are less inclined to engage actively. However, there have been only a couple of instances, as far as I can recall, where it is probable that they [the mothers] won’t initiate to contact or advocate for these matters. The question arises: Why are we making such efforts? Undoubtedly, this presents a noticeable imbalance that has

caught my attention. I find that there is a greater discrepancy among specific groups of children. When considering this, I consistently return to the influence of students' families. Specifically, there seems to be a difference in the level of advocacy among families of students who are Caucasian. They tend to be more proactive in advocating for their children.

Sean also discussed the association between marginalized students and their parents who do not advocate for their children, resulting in disparities:

I do feel that the students who slip through the cracks tend to be Black students. When I get to think about it more, I think that there's a correlation, too. I feel like the students who need the support who are receiving it are more often not the students who are Black. And then when I think about it in a different light. Typically, minority families are the ones who do not contact us.

With regard to the subtheme of lack of parental advocacy, the participants highlighted the factors that contributed to disparities as a result of parents being less likely to advocate for services. Based on the participants' lived experiences, disparities emerge because of a lack of advocacy by parents of marginalized students, which may lead to gaps in support and services. The participants' lived experiences demonstrated the critical need for proactive and equitable involvement to address these disparities effectively.

### ***Demographics of Leadership***

The participants discussed the predominantly White composition of the school's leadership and teachers. Maplewood Academy did not make data available regarding the demographics of administrators and board members, but Kate said, "The [Maplewood Academy] doesn't have a lot of administrators [of color] when we meet with the larger agency. It is very

Caucasian. Actually, I think it's noticeably so." Mike reiterated this point: "You know, like the bosses and the bosses, the bosses as we go up that ladder, I would say it gets less diverse. Teachers are a little less diverse. The administration is very less diverse, and the same thing with the stakeholders."

On the other hand, Peter described "a fairly diverse population of administrators," although he subsequently mentioned that "it was mostly White." Peter also observed that diversity among administrators seemed to be improving over time: "Currently that we do see a larger percentage [of diverse individuals than before]." In connection with the subtheme of demographics of leadership, the participants discussed the lack of diversity within leadership positions. Participants' perceptions varied to some extent.

### *Socioeconomic Status*

Three participants connected disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with the students' economic backgrounds. Mike remarked that he did not notice disparities related to race or ethnicity; instead, he noticed disparities related to socioeconomic status: "In my opinion, there is not much disparity [in race or ethnicity]. What I have noticed, though, it's for the most part most of my students probably do come from a lower economic background, though." Sean made a similar remark: "Most of the disparity, the racial and ethnic components, do not disregard cultural importance or anything like that, but a lot of times it's economics." Sean's observation about the connection between economic status and racial demographics highlighted the need to address economic inequalities within the educational system. Rachel discussed a comparable aspect of disparity in economic resources among racial and ethnically diverse students: "They [racially or ethnically diverse students] don't have the families with as much money [as White families]."



The participants highlighted the need for comprehensive strategies to address economic inequalities. Sean mentioned, “When you’re looking at economic status and demographics, most of the students of color have less economic means.” In connection with the subtheme of socioeconomic status, the participants stated that ongoing racial disparities in special education were tied closely to socioeconomic factors.

### *Lack of Awareness*

From the interviews, data emerged indicating that some participants lacked awareness of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students, especially those concerning students’ backgrounds and experiences. Cindy acknowledged the limitations of her background:

I don’t have the same background as my students. I come from a small town. I think I had two people of color in my class growing up. It’s taken work for me to do my own work and talk to people and kind of work to be more aware.

When Rachel was asked about the equity requirements mandated by the IDEA (2019), she implied that she was not particularly concerned about this information, possibly questioning its relevance in the context of diagnosis: “I don’t know [about the equity requirements]. I don’t really think it’s necessary to know what their ethnic background is.”

Kate’s insights highlighted lack of awareness: “I also believe that [the] school should work on acknowledging that disparities might exist.” Kate observed that efforts to address disparity issues had proved insufficient:

I was very heartbroken about how the school had dealt with [disparities], how come some White students can make racial slurs over and over again, and target minority staff and be aggressive towards them. ... I cried a couple of times over that because it really hurt me. I felt like people [the teachers] weren’t showing proactiveness. We, [staff from

Maplewood Academy], did start doing Juneteenth. We had a picnic to celebrate Juneteenth. I couldn't tell you if a single teacher told the students [about Juneteenth], and asked the students what do you think Juneteenth is? Instead, we ate the food without a discussion about Juneteenth.

Sean shared his experience in an urban public school, highlighting the differences of cultures:

I remember when I was at a city school. I'm Mr. Johnson. A lot of my young Latino students in the city would call me, like, Mr. Sean. But that is this traditional standard within their own communities of how they refer to an adult. And I didn't say anything, but I was like taken aback and had to go and talk to some other teacher.

Although the participants indicated that either their school should have made more effort or they needed to be more aware of diversity, Mike noted that the existing focus on cultural celebrations and diversity initiatives might already be adequate:

I do think we do a really good job, treating all the [students] equally. We have programs in place. We celebrate cultures. We have cultural diversity club. Staff members discuss once a month what we can do for the month. We have free breakfast and free lunch. Once a week on a Friday, we have fun Fridays around different cultures. In February, I spent a lot of time doing like Black History Month. In my history classes, I usually cover at least a few lessons about cultural diversity.

When Peter was asked about his racial and ethnic self-identity, he answered, "Myself? I'm from a family who is middle class and American. It's hard for me to describe it. I just think that."

Eventually, he said that he was from a White family.

In connection with the subtheme of lack of awareness, the discussion of disparities and school efforts revealed a spectrum of contrasting views. Participants' perspectives ranged from a

call for increased efforts to create an inclusive environment to Mike's belief that the existing emphasis on cultural celebrations and diversity initiatives was already substantial. This spectrum also ranged from Rachel's indifference to Peter's hesitation to discuss the topic of race. The participants held contrasting views regarding disparities and school efforts.

### ***Improper Policy Application***

The participants discussed the link between improper policy application and inequalities in education as a cause of the disparities. Sean saw a lack of follow-through in the educational system, where efforts to address issues were not always effectively implemented:

There's a lot of putting things in place, but not really thinking about whether they follow through. I think a lot of times there's [students] with academic gaps and behavior issues that are being sort of unaddressed during their earlier ages and then later they are put into special education as they act out more.

Sean's statement implied that improper policies and educational gaps had led to inequalities. He emphasized the need to work together for a fair and inclusive education system. He highlighted the existence of students with academic gaps and behavioral challenges. If unaddressed, such issues could lead to behavioral problems and eventual placement in special education.

With regard to Theme 2—causes of disparities—the participants shared their lived experiences about causes of disparities. Their discussions led to identification of six subthemes: improper diagnoses, lack of parental advocacy, demographics of leadership, socioeconomic status, lack of awareness, and improper policy application. Their perspectives varied. Themes 3 and 4 relate to recommendations for addressing disparities shared by the participants.

### **Theme 3: Support and Engagement for Students**

In connection with Theme 3—support and engagement for students—the participants suggested ways teachers and schools could address disparities. The participants indicated that even though relevant regulations and laws existed, schools should strive to provide better support. Peter stated, “I do believe that we should always be focused on the student and what makes the best for those particular students.” Three subthemes emerged in connection with Theme 3: supporting students based on their individual needs, sense of community, and teaching with an intersectional approach.

#### ***Supporting Students Based on Their Individual Needs***

Several of the participants pointed out the importance of addressing the individual needs of students. Kate emphasized the importance of ensuring that all students receive appropriate support and services, even if family members do not advocate or follow through. She believed educators should incentivize students to access necessary resources and strive for provision of equitable services for all. Kate argued:

I think that it might become our job to pick up the slack regardless of the family advocating, and however exhausted the plans may be to encourage the student to get the services that they need. We [the teachers] should be doing more to make sure that all the students are getting incentivized. To achieve this, all students need to receive the same amount of services.

Peter advocated a student-centered approach focusing on individualization and addressing challenging issues to best meet each student’s needs. Peter explained, “I know individualization is really hard to do. Sometimes the hard things are the things we need to work

on the most.” He highlighted the significance of recognizing and supporting the unique characteristics and requirements of every student.

In connection with the subtheme of supporting students based on their individual needs, the participants discussed the importance of prioritizing a student-centered approach in special education. Kate mentioned there could be barriers, “however exhausted the plans may be.” But Kate also said that individualized service should be provided “regardless of the family advocating” “to encourage the student to get the services that they need.” Peter also acknowledged that “individualizing is really hard,” but he emphasized that “it’s really important that we should address the needs of each student individually.”

### *Sense of Community*

Sense of community emerged as a subtheme. Peter emphasized the importance of community in education, arguing that fostering a sense of belonging and togetherness is essential for students. He aimed to create a positive and engaging learning environment in which students felt like they were part of a larger, collective experience. Peter said, “So, I think that communities are important, and where the [students] are being raised. I like to do things that bring the [students] that sense of community that whole idea that I’m part of this big experiment.”

In connection with the subtheme of sense of community, Peter emphasized the significance of communities and environments in which students are raised. He expressed a desire to engage in activities that foster a sense of community among students and evoke a feeling of being part of a collective endeavor. Peter emphasized fostering a sense of community and belonging. He believed that a sense of community may be pivotal in the creation of social connections.

### *Teaching With an Intersectional Approach*

The participants discussed teaching with an intersectional approach to support students' needs. Cindy recognized the importance of education and the necessity of it evolving to better meet the needs of today's students. Embracing cultural diversity and fostering well-rounded education can have numerous positive impacts on students' learning experiences and overall development. Cindy mentioned, "You know, our school is rightfully so, and as it should be different from when I was in school. We are trying to be more cognizant of teaching in a well-rounded manner, culturally."

By incorporating diverse and hands-on activities, Peter created an inclusive and engaging classroom environment that benefited all students in special education. Peter explained:

I try to do diverse kinds of activities because I'm a person who likes hands-on. I think our students respond positively to hands-on learning. Many of them have disabilities that can affect their learning process. So, I incorporate auditory and visual hands-on activities in the classroom. Students are often engaged more in active learning experiences.

Incorporating the stories of underrepresented groups and highlighting their contributions to history can empower students with similar backgrounds, making them feel seen and valued in the classroom. Rachel said, "When I teach history, we do not just focus on the negative side of it. We also discuss the different backgrounds and perspectives to provide all aspects of history."

In connection with this subtheme, participants' perspectives aligned with the lens of teaching with an intersectional approach. Cindy's emphasis on a well-rounded education that acknowledges cultural diversity exemplified a commitment to providing a holistic understanding of students' multifaceted backgrounds. Peter's incorporation of diverse activities and learning styles catered to the intersectionality of students' needs, ensuring an inclusive and engaging

classroom environment. Rachel's focus on empowering underrepresented groups in history aligns with the intersectional lens by acknowledging the value of diverse perspectives and contributions. These lived experiences collectively underscore the significance of teaching with an intersectional approach.

Theme 3 was support and engagement for students. The participants acknowledged the disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students. Participants shared strategies for supporting these students in special education to address the disparities. Their recommendations varied based on their experiences and beliefs. Their discussions led to the identification of three subthemes: supporting students based on their individual needs, sense of community, and teaching with an intersectional approach. In connection with Theme 4, the participants discussed the efforts made by schools.

#### **Theme 4: Empowering and Fostering School Settings**

With regard to Theme 4—empowering and fostering school settings—the participants offered recommendations for how teachers and schools could address disparities. Kate said, “I feel like the students who need the support, who are receiving it, are more often than not the students who are Black.” Kate's perspective suggests that schools should improve inequity, as discussed in this section. The following subthemes emerged in connection with Theme 4: more diversity in leadership, instructional support with culturally responsive teaching perspectives, and equity and diversity in teacher evaluation. The subsections that follow discuss these subthemes.

##### ***More Diversity in Leadership***

The participants emphasized the significance of representation in the teaching profession. Peter advocated for more “Hispanic and Black teachers entering the field, as I think these

[racially and ethnically diverse] students could really benefit from the teachers' presence." Kate also addressed the need for students, especially those with emotional challenges or who have had tough experiences, to have teachers they can relate to:

My students are mostly emotionally disturbed, and they have some tough experiences. I think it is great when students can talk to me about their problems. But wouldn't it be better if there were more teachers who looked like the students so that they could relate to them better and look up to them? There could be a more diverse group of role models for [students] in the schools and teaching positions and positions of power, so that the [students] could see diversity because they need to see more hope in the world and feel less like minorities.

Sean's comments highlighted a critical aspect of promoting diversity in the teaching profession and its potential impact on the dynamics between teachers and students. Sean said:

I think that we should work on hiring more people of color and we should work on that. It is situated within the dynamics between teachers and students, as well as the intricate interplay of factors such as race, ethnicity, and economics.

In connection with the subtheme of more diversity in leadership, participants expressed the belief that teachers with similar racial and ethnic backgrounds to those of their students could enhance sense of belonging and offer relatable role models. Their insights ranged from emphasizing the value of relatability and mentorship to advocating for the creation of an environment of hope and belonging among students. Their perspectives collectively emphasized the multifaceted significance of representation in the teaching profession. This subtheme revealed the participants' shared recognition of how a diverse teaching staff can encompass various dimensions of students' identities.



### *Instructional Support With Culturally Responsive Teaching Perspectives*

About the subtheme of instructional support with culturally responsive teaching perspectives, the participants emphasized the need for instructional support through a culturally responsive lens. Kate recognized the importance of cultural representation in curriculum and staff. She urged proactive efforts to bring culture into the curriculum and create a safe and equitable environment for all students, going beyond mere compliance and truly recognizing each student's uniqueness:

Students come in with different backgrounds. ... I feel like nobody is asking questions like "What are teachers doing to bring culture into your curriculum?" "What are you doing for the staff, so they feel safer?" So even though I feel like we're doing a nice job teaching the students in an equitable manner. ... It's our job to do the work to allow the students to feel equitable above and beyond checking the boxes.

Rachel shared her perspectives as a math teacher. She believed that resources and training should be available to help educators, especially math teachers, effectively support students.

Rachel explained the support she needed:

It's instructional support for teachers, especially in my case as a math teacher. Teaching math is hard when it comes to integrating a culturally competent curriculum effectively. But having instructional training [for math teachers] and being supportive will be helpful. ... The resources and the expectations should be provided.

Cindy highlighted the need to be more aware and mindful of teaching in a well-rounded and culturally responsive manner. Cindy said:

I don't know that I necessarily have a specific curriculum or program that I've used because our students' skill set varies so much within a class, we don't necessarily follow

a single curriculum a lot of the time. It's a pull a little bit from here and pull a little bit from here. ... For example, when we talk about our space program, we talk about Mae Jemison and all these amazing people of color who have been to space and their contributions to our space program. We discuss this because that's not always in our textbooks, and it's important that we educate our students about their contributions, right?

Sean, on the other hand, advocated for a flexible and adaptive approach to teaching focusing on the needs of individual students. Sean said:

We're going to implement this multicultural unit, which will prove beneficial for both teachers and students. We're aware that the teacher wields the most significant influence over student outcomes that we can control. Yet, we tend to overlook the real-life interactions, don't we? Our focus is often on teaching strategies rather than the personal dynamics at play. In simpler terms, my perspective is this: Instead of treating it as a fixed structure, we should view it as a dynamic organism. It's alright to try an approach, acknowledge if it requires revisiting or adjusting, and persistently strive to align with our ultimate objectives.

In connection with this subtheme, the participants accentuated the necessity of instructional support and the incorporation of culturally responsive teaching perspectives. Their suggestions were as varied as their teaching subjects, experiences, and perspectives. Collectively, their insights underscored the importance of cultural responsiveness, proactive efforts, and adaptable teaching methods. The participants believed those were necessary to the creation of inclusive school settings.

### *Equity and Diversity in Teacher Evaluation*

The participants emphasized the importance of equitable teaching in teacher evaluation. They believed that equitable teaching would contribute to a more supportive educational environment. Cindy said, “We need to give teachers better tools.” Cindy also mentioned that “it should be done before teacher evaluation for culturally responsive instruction is implemented.”

Mike emphasized again the importance of understanding and accepting differences: “We need to understand people’s cultures and how we can accept our differences in our cultures between each other.” Sean also discussed the importance of understanding and accepting differences and the need for adequate training for evaluation of existing teachers:

I didn’t undergo any specific formal training, but I had an experience in a school with a highly diverse student population. This was an inner district magnet school with a staff reflecting the same diversity. Consequently, we were compelled to recognize and navigate cultural distinctions. From my standpoint, there’s a substantial aspect concerning language standards and defined limits that remains unattended in the current evaluation of teacher training.

Kate suggested that teacher evaluation should include setting expectations at the beginning of the school year to avoid retroactive assessments. Kate said, “At the start of the school year, it’s important to tell teachers what’s expected. You can’t go back later and say, ‘Hey, you’re not doing enough.’” Kate also highlighted the importance of discussions about diversity and curriculum during hiring, particularly hiring of history and English teachers: “I think when schools hire teachers, they should talk about this. For example, if you teach history, it makes sense. The same goes for English teachers, who should include different cultures and races in what they teach.” She emphasized the need to address ethnic and racial diversity in the

curriculum and ensure that administrators were available for check-ins and support. Kate believed that evaluations should take into consideration whether teachers are meeting the diverse needs of their students:

This should be a clear rule, and if teachers need help, their bosses should be there to support them. This should also be part of how teachers are checked and judged because our students should get what they need, no matter where they come from.

In connection with the subtheme of equity and diversity in teacher evaluation, the participants explained that integrating specific components into teacher evaluation would yield beneficial results, aiding teachers in applying instructional practices. However, they described a need for better tools and resources. The participants also highlighted the need for opportunities for professional development to enhance the teacher evaluation process with culturally responsive elements. They underscored the importance of clear expectations and providing teachers with a clear understanding of the criteria and goals of evaluation.

In relation to Theme 4—empowering and fostering school settings—the participants provided recommendations for supporting racially and ethnically diverse students in special education to address and mitigate disparities. The primary focus was how schools could improve the situation. Their discussions led to the identification of three subthemes: more diversity in leadership, instructional support with culturally responsive teaching perspectives, and equity and diversity in teacher evaluation. Although participants viewed disparities from different angles, they collectively emphasized that schools have both obligations and the capacity to implement these plans.

## Summary

This researcher interviewed six participants who fit the phenomenological study's criteria. All six participants were employed at Maplewood Academy, a state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. The participants discussed their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education. They provided detailed and descriptive responses regarding their perspectives and experiences as teachers in special education. This researcher's data collection and analysis captured the valuable lived experiences of teachers in special education, which this chapter presented as the thematic findings. Chapter 5 describes the interpretation and importance of findings, implications related to the findings, recommendations for future action and study, and the conclusions of the study.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The problem explored in this qualitative phenomenological study was the need to understand the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2016; Leung, 2021; Lhamon et al., 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). This researcher explored the lived experiences of six participants teaching in a state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education. This researcher's perspective derived from her professional experience of having worked as a teacher of students with special needs and as cochair of the equity, diversity, and inclusion committee in a state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. In addition, this researcher's identity as a member of a marginalized race and an immigrant to the United States led to an interpretation based on looking through an intersectionality lens.

This researcher conducted semi structured interviews with six participants to explore the topic. Four themes emerged from the data. Theme 1 was the existence of disparities. In connection with this theme, the participants acknowledged the existence of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in special education. However, their perspectives varied concerning the underlying causes of these disparities. Theme 2 was causes of disparities. The participants identified factors contributing to the observed disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students in special education. The findings reflected these factors in six subthemes: improper diagnoses, lack of parental advocacy, demographics of leadership, socioeconomic status, lack of awareness, and improper policy

application. Theme 3 was support and engagement for students. Despite the existence of regulations and laws, the participants expressed their conviction that schools should strive to provide enhanced support. The data relating to this theme yielded three subthemes: supporting students based on their individual needs, fostering a sense of community, and employing an intersectional teaching approach. Theme 4 was empowering and fostering school settings. This final theme included the following subthemes: more diversity in leadership, instructional support with culturally responsive teaching perspectives, and equity and diversity in teacher evaluation.

### **Interpretation and Importance of Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021). A single research question guided this study:

What are the lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education?

Six participants responded to the questions in the semi structured interview protocol (Appendix D). This researcher posed the interview questions, anticipating that the lived experiences shared by the participants would correspond to the research topics identified in the literature review.

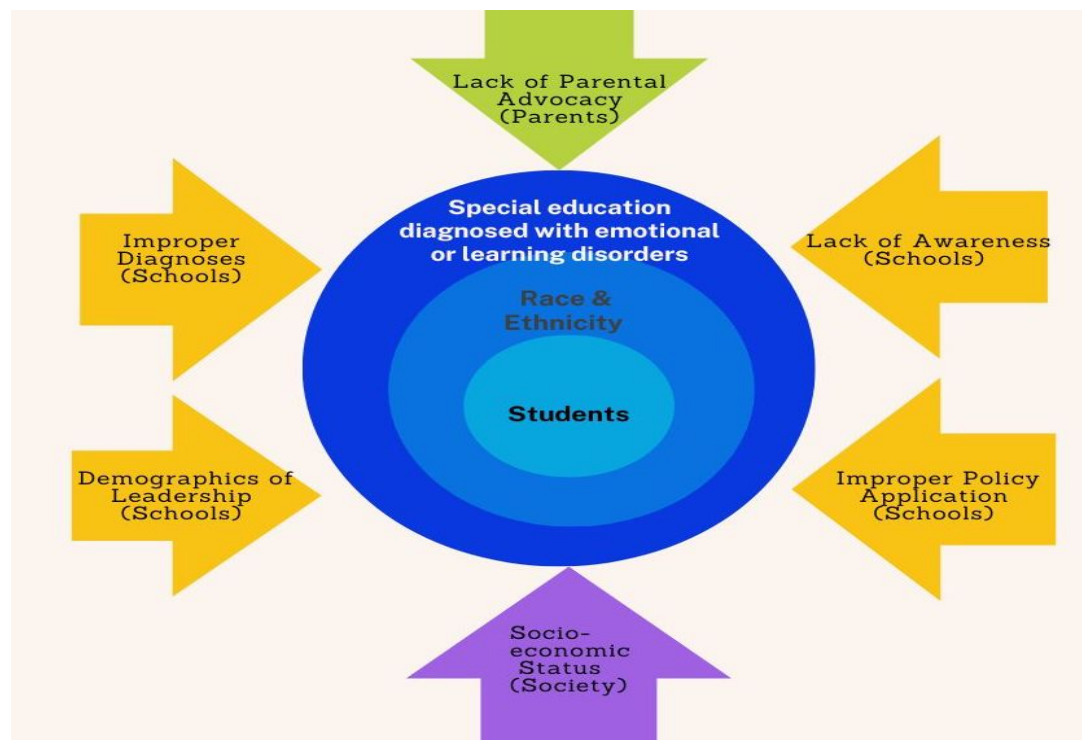
Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) was used as the theoretical framework for this study.

In connection with Theme 1, existence of disparities, the participants recognized the presence of disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in special education. Kate said, “Why isn’t [the student] going to have the

service? I do think that it's a racial discrepancy." Sean echoed this idea: "I've noticed more students of color being put into special education for behavioral problems/learning disabilities that more or less have." Disparities occur when students in a racial or ethnic group are, relative to their White peers, more likely to be identified as having a disability, placed in more restrictive settings, or experience a higher rate of discipline (IDEA, 2019). This theme highlights the acknowledgment of a significant issue that requires attention and investigation. Identifying and understanding the existence of disparities is crucial for developing targeted interventions to address challenges faced by racially and ethnically diverse students in special education.

In connection with Theme 2, causes of disparities, the participants identified several factors contributing to the observed disparities. These factors encompassed issues such as improper diagnoses, lack of parental advocacy, demographics of leadership, socioeconomic status, lack of awareness, and improper policy application. According to intersectionality theory, racially and ethnically diverse students suffer from the effects of multiple factors of marginalization coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate nonintersectional contexts, shaping, and ultimately limiting the opportunities for meaningful intervention on their behalf (Crenshaw, 1991). From Theme 2, these causes can be divided among three responsible parties: families (lack of parental advocacy), schools (improper diagnoses, demographic composition of leadership, limited awareness, and ineffective policy), and society (need for socioeconomic support), as seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3***Causes of Disparities*

*Note.* The circles represent layers of marginalized factors that students face, with the innermost circle representing students and outer circles representing broader societal or systemic influences.

Cindy questioned whether diagnosis of emotional or learning disorders among racially and ethnically diverse students was unbiased:

It starts with diagnoses. Why are we diagnosing the student? Are they not able to read and comprehend the material? Or are they not able to understand and connect with the material? [Is it] because of our cultural differences that the students do not understand the material?

Diagnoses such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and learning disability rely on psychologists' professional judgment rather than medical criteria (Annamma et al., 2014; Skrtic et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Such diagnostic categories differ from strictly biological diagnostic categories (e.g., visual impairment), because their construction and diagnosis involve considerable subjective judgment (Annamma et al., 2018; Phuong, 2017; Skrtic et al., 2021). The evaluation and implementation of a student's education program should involve an understanding of the cultural practices of the student (Annamma et al., 2014; Phuong, 2017; Thorius, 2019). Unless evaluators and teachers improve their cultural views and biased lenses, the unfair systemic cycle will repeat, and racially and ethnically diverse students may not receive equitable education (Annamma et al., 2014).

Disproportionality among leadership and teaching staff has negatively influenced racially and ethnically diverse students (Redding, 2019; Thorius, 2019). This lack of representation can lead to incomplete understanding of the diverse needs and perspectives of an entire school community (Benson & Fiarman, 2019). Peter advocated for more "Hispanic and Black teachers entering the field, as I think these [racially and ethnically diverse] students could really benefit from the teachers' presence." Kate also addressed the need for students, especially those with emotional challenges or who have had tough experiences, to have teachers they can relate to:

But wouldn't it be better if there were more teachers who looked like the students so that they could relate to them better and look up to them? There could be a more diverse group of role models for [students] in the schools and teaching positions and positions of power, so that the [students] could see diversity because they need to see more hope in the world and feel less like minorities.

Just as racial and socioeconomic segregation have continued, racial disparity in special education has persisted, despite the efforts of researchers to study these disparities and nationwide policy attempts to improve the disparities (Thorius, 2019). The participants said the disparities were tied to families' socioeconomic needs. Sean remarked, "Most of the disparity, the racial and ethnic components, do not disregard cultural importance or anything like that, but a lot of times it's economics." Rachel shared a comparable thought: "They [racially or ethnically diverse students] don't have the families with as much money [as White families]." Mike saw disparities as based not on race or ethnicity but on socioeconomic needs: "In my opinion there is not much disparity [in race or ethnicity]. What I have noticed, though, it's for the most part of my students probably do come from a lower economic background, though."

The participants stated that ongoing racial disparities in special education were tied closely to socioeconomic factors. However, linking causes to socioeconomic variables depends on the assumption that all diagnoses are fair and unbiased (Collins et al., 2016). Grindal et al. (2019) found racially and ethnically diverse students received diagnoses of emotional and learning disorders about twice as often as White students with the same socioeconomic background. The findings of these studies and the participants' responses regarding connection with socioeconomic factors in special education do not explain why racially and ethnically diverse students receive diagnoses of emotional and learning disorders more frequently than their peers do (Jackson et al., 2016). Regardless of the severity of disciplinary action, degree of school poverty, or type of public school attended, disparities have been pervasive (Grindal et al., 2019; Nowicki, 2020; Skiba et al., 2008).

Disparities may have resulted from explicit policies over many generations that have prevented racially and ethnically diverse students from accumulating wealth, education, and

property while explicitly protecting and increasing support for White people to advance in those areas (Benson & Fiarman, 2019, p. 403). Sean had observed lack of follow-through in the educational system, in which efforts to address issues were not always effectively implemented:

There's a lot of putting things in place, but not really thinking about whether they follow through. I think a lot of times there's [students] with academic gaps and behavior issues that are being sort of unaddressed during their earlier ages and then later they are put into special education as they act out more.

By identifying these contributing factors, educators, policymakers, and researchers can work toward implementing changes that address the specific challenges faced by racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in special education.

With regard to Theme 3, support and engagement for students, the participants emphasized the need for schools to go beyond compliance and strive for enhanced support. Peter stated, "I do believe that we should always be focused on the student and what makes the best for those particular students." The participants shared strategies for supporting these students in special education to address the disparities. Their recommendations varied based on their experiences and beliefs. Three subthemes emerged: supporting students based on their individual needs, sense of community, and teaching with an intersectional approach. The IDEA (2019) requires public schools to furnish high-quality educational services and opportunities for students with special needs (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). The Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a child with a disability is a written statement designed for the student that is created, reviewed, and updated during a meeting to comply with set guidelines (IDEA, 2019). Implementation of the IDEA (2019) emphasizes the provision of excellent educational resources and opportunities for students with special needs within the public school system (Kramarczuk

Voulgarides et al., 2021). It is crucial to examine school and teacher activities, as well as student relationships, from the perspective of intersectionality because special education has historically received criticism for adopting an interventionist and medical-model view of disability (Phuong, 2017).

A strong sense of belonging can positively impact students' engagement and overall well-being, enhancing their learning experiences (Bešić, 2020). Peter emphasized the importance of community in education, arguing that fostering a sense of belonging and togetherness is essential for students. He aimed to create a positive and engaging learning environment in which students felt like they were part of a larger, collective experience. Peter said, "So, I think that communities are important, and where the [students] are being raised. I like to do things that bring the [students] that sense of community that whole idea that I'm part of this big experiment." Cindy highlighted the need to be more aware and mindful of teaching in a well-rounded and culturally sensitive manner. Cindy said:

I don't know that I necessarily have a specific curriculum or program that I've used because our students' skill set varies so much within a class, we don't necessarily follow a single curriculum a lot of the time. It's a pull a little bit from here and pull a little bit from here. ... For example, when we talk about our space program, we talk about Mae Jemison and all these amazing people of color that have been to space and their contributions to our space program. We discuss this because that's not always in our textbooks, and it's important that we educate our students about their contributions, right?

Theme 3 underscores the importance of personalized support and a holistic approach to education. The theme highlights the need for educational institutions to recognize the unique

needs and experiences of diverse students and to create inclusive and supportive environments that promotes their academic and emotional well-being.

In connection with Theme 4, the participants emphasized the importance of empowering and fostering positive school settings. Annamma et al. (2018) stated that people must comprehend how biases can affect teachers' attitudes and actions toward students of color, who have experienced several forms of marginalization. Rachel stated that, ideally, during teacher evaluation "[the administrators] would be able to measure someone's biases that they might have or similar factors." She elaborated on her perspectives as a math teacher. She believed that resources and training should be available to help educators, especially math teachers, effectively support students. Rachel added that teachers needed instructional support:

It's instructional support for teachers, especially in my case as a math teacher. Teaching math is hard when it comes to integrating a culturally competent curriculum effectively.

But having instructional training [for math teachers] and being supportive will be helpful.

The participants emphasized the necessity of instructional support and incorporation of culturally responsive teaching perspectives. Hammond (2015) defined culturally responsive teaching as "the process of using familiar cultural information and processes to scaffold learning, emphasizing communal orientation, focusing on relationships, cognitive scaffolding, and critical social awareness" (p. 156). The participants' suggestions were as varied as their subjects, experiences, and perspectives. Collectively, their lived experiences underscore the importance of cultural responsiveness, proactive efforts, and adaptable teaching methods. The participants argued those features were necessary for creation of inclusive school settings.

The participants emphasized the importance of equity and diversity in teacher evaluation. They stated that equity and diversity offered benefits that contributed to a more equitable and

supportive educational environment. Cindy said, “We need to give teachers better tools.” Cindy also emphasized that “it should be done before teacher evaluation for culturally responsive instruction is implemented.”

Mike again emphasized the importance of understanding and accepting differences. Mike explained, “We need to understand people’s cultures and how we can accept our differences in our cultures between each other.” Sean also discussed the importance of understanding and accepting differences and the need for adequate training for the evaluation of existing teachers:

I didn’t undergo any specific formal training, but I had an experience in a school with a highly diverse student population. This was an inner district magnet school with a staff reflecting the same diversity. Consequently, we were compelled to recognize and navigate cultural distinctions. From my standpoint, there’s a substantial aspect concerning language standards and defined limits that remains unattended in the current evaluation of teacher training.

Empowering school settings that promote diversity, cultural responsiveness, and equity and diversity in teacher evaluation can lead to more equitable outcomes for all students, particularly racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders. (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Thorius, 2019; Thorius et al., 2018). The findings provide insight into disparities resulting from intersectionality, causes of those disparities, support mechanisms, and systemic changes required to create more inclusive and equitable educational environments for racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in special education. This researcher’s interpretation of these insights emphasizes the significance of addressing intersectional factors that influence students’ experiences and outcomes within the education system.

There were three unexpected findings. First, some participants did not attribute disparities to factors related to race and ethnicity but instead linked them solely to economic status, aligning with P. Morgan et al.'s (2017) assertion that disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students in special education often mask broader societal disparities in income or living conditions. The researchers argued that concentrating solely on racial or ethnic disparities might lead to misguided conclusions about racial discrimination in U.S. schools (P. Morgan et al., 2017). This perspective may also shed light on why Peter hesitated to engage in discussions about race. However, it is important to note that basing research on the interconnectedness of racial diversity with socioeconomic factors can yield mistaken conclusions such as that most racially and ethnically diverse students are from low-income families. P. Morgan et al. hypothesized that racially and ethnically diverse students may disproportionately come from low-income families. Rachel also said that racially and ethnically diverse students “are” from families with less financial resources: “They don’t have the families with as much money [as White families].” As a result of this hypothesis, these students may face higher risks than other students from a young age and may not demonstrate school readiness, potentially leading to their qualification for special education services (P. Morgan et al., 2017). However, this historically underrepresented population faces systemic barriers and oppression, resulting in fewer opportunities to advocate for their needs, perpetuating an unfair systemic cycle (Annamma et al., 2014). Therefore, addressing disparities systematically is crucial (Jackson et al., 2016).

Furthermore, P. Morgan et al. (2017) linked socioeconomic variables under the assumption that all diagnoses are impartial and unbiased (Collins et al., 2016). But Grindal et al. (2019) found racially, and ethnically diverse students received diagnoses of emotional and learning disorders at nearly twice the rate of White students with similar socioeconomic



backgrounds. Researchers explored the connection between socioeconomic factors and special education, failed to explain why racially and ethnically diverse students receive diagnoses of emotional and learning disorders more frequently than their peers (Jackson et al., 2016). Irrespective of the severity of disciplinary action, level of school poverty, or type of public school attended, disparities have persisted across the board (Grindal et al., 2019; Nowicki, 2020; Skiba et al., 2008).

The second unexpected finding was that the participants needed more tools and training to implement culturally responsive components in teacher evaluation and instruction. They needed clear guidelines and expectations. Kate suggested, “At the start of the school year, it’s important to tell teachers what’s expected.” The New York State Education Department (2018) created the Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Education Framework. This framework rests on the assumption that systemic inequity is often associated with disadvantages based on linguistic background, gender, skin color, and other characteristics (New York State Education Department, 2018). The framework also reflects the position that the main reason for disparities in special education is teachers’ cultural incompetence in relation to responding to diverse students’ needs (Leung, 2021).

The third unexpected finding was the wide range of participants’ perspectives about the school’s efforts to improve disparities—from Mike’s insight that the school had been doing excellent work to Kate’s insight that she was heartbroken about how the school had dealt with disparities. Racial disparities in special education have persisted despite amendments made to the IDEA in 1990, 1997, 2004, and 2016, just as racial and socioeconomic segregation have continued (Thorius, 2019); this contrasted with Mike’s perspective of equity work, which he

found satisfactory. Some districts have symbolically complied with the disciplinary mandates of IDEA and only superficially applied them to practice (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021).

Overall, these unexpected findings offer a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with tackling disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students in special education. Even though other factors may be relevant to achievement gaps—such as poverty levels, communities, and parents’ support—Startz (2020) stated that around 90% of racial achievement gaps were unexplained, implying that race can still affect gaps through policy variations both inside and outside the classroom. The unexpected findings of this study contribute to understanding of unexplained disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students, irrespective of other societal factors (Lhamon et al., 2019). These findings may contribute to a more nuanced and informed discourse on how to address disparities and promote equitable education for all students.

This section presented the important findings and their interpretation based on the four themes discussed in Chapter 4. These themes were relevant to this study’s research question. They successfully contributed to answering this question and this contributed to the literature. The next section presents implications of the findings, exploring how the findings can inform actions, and future research directions.

### **Implications**

The rationale for this study was the need to identify lived experiences of primary and secondary teachers who have worked with racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut. The findings yielded factors explaining why disparities among those students have persisted, especially among students diagnosed with learning disorders or emotional disturbance. Equity requirements in

special education must be reported (O'Hara & Bollmer, 2021), and educational disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs have long attracted the attention of researchers (Cavendish et al., 2018). They mentioned that despite attempts to raise awareness of equity in special education for racially and ethnically diverse students, disparities in special education have persisted.

The significance of this study may influence teachers to address disparities in special education, helping the teachers and their students. The findings from the six semi structured interviews may help existing teachers and school leaders build awareness and create possible solutions. The beliefs and practices of teachers should include an understanding of the cultural and historical nature of the disparities and gaps faced by racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (Thorius, 2019). Reducing or eliminating disparities among students at intersections of ability, language, and race requires working on culturally responsive instruction (Thorius et al., 2018). The goal of culturally responsive instruction is to equip and prepare teachers with skills and awareness needed to advance school practice (Benson & Fiarman, 2019; Thorius, 2019; Thorius et al., 2018).

Figure 3 illustrates the layers of marginalized causes due to external factors faced by racially and ethnically diverse students diagnosed with emotional or learning disorders. The responsible parties, based on the responses of the participants, were parents, schools, and society. The causes were not a consequence of the ability of students or under students' control. The concept of the intersection of marginalized causes conveys a profound understanding of the challenges faced by racially and ethnically diverse students diagnosed with emotional or learning disorders (Etherington et al., 2020). These factors are rooted in systemic, societal, and institutional dynamics, highlighting that the difficulties these students encounter are not solely

attributable to their abilities or actions (Lhamon et al., 2019). The evaluation and implementation of a student's IEP should involve an understanding of the cultural practices of the student (Annamma et al., 2014; Phuong, 2017; Thorius, 2019).

Diagnoses such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and learning disability rely on the professional judgment of psychologists rather than medical criteria (Annamma et al., 2014; Skrtic et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Some students may experience misdiagnosis or inaccurate assessment because of cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, or limitations of diagnostic tools (Phuong, 2017). Such errors can result in students not receiving appropriate support and interventions they need to thrive academically. Typical White evaluators may identify people of color as disabled more often than they identify White people as disabled because the evaluators do not understand cultural norms (Annamma et al., 2014); as a result, their interpretation may depend on context (Phuong, 2017). Cindy questioned diagnoses:

It starts with diagnoses. Why are we diagnosing the student? Are they not able to read and comprehend the material? Or are they not able to understand and connect with the material? [Is it] because of our cultural differences that the students do not understand the material?

Kate also mentioned disparities in diagnoses: "There was an overidentification of [minority] students with learning disabilities."

School leaders and educators might lack cultural sensitivity and awareness, leading to an inadequate understanding of the unique needs of racially and ethnically diverse students.

Reducing or eliminating disparities among students at intersections of ability, language, and race requires working on culturally responsive curricula (Thorius et al., 2018) that draw on both instructional strategies and students' cultural backgrounds. Socioeconomic disparities can

contribute to unequal access to resources, quality education, and support services. These inequalities can disproportionately affect marginalized students, further widening the achievement gap (P. Morgan et al., 2017). Sean said, “Most of the disparity, the racial and ethnic components, do not disregard cultural importance or anything like that, but a lot of times it’s economics.” Institutional policies and practices might inadvertently perpetuate disparities. Biases in disciplinary actions, tracking systems, and resource allocation can disproportionately impact racially and ethnically diverse students.

The identification of parents, schools, and society as the responsible parties adds another layer of complexity. These parties collectively contribute to the systemic challenges faced by racially and ethnically diverse students. Parents might lack the knowledge or resources needed to advocate effectively for their children’s needs. However, Kate emphasized that “it might become our [teachers’] job to pick up the slack regardless of the family advocating.” A school is obliged to and capable of providing equitable education regardless of external factors such as society and parents (NEA, 2018; New York State Education Department, 2018).

In essence, the layers of the intersection demonstrate the importance of a comprehensive approach to addressing educational disparities. By recognizing the layers of marginalized causes and understanding the responsible parties involved, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders can work collaboratively to dismantle these barriers. Through collective efforts these parties can initiate systemic changes to create a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for all students, irrespective of background, ability, or circumstances. This section discussed the layers of causes, the responsible parties, and their effects on students. The next section presents recommendations for action based on the findings, providing practical steps with which to address the identified issues and enhance educational equity.

## **Recommendations for Action**

This section discusses two recommendations for action school leaders can consider as ways to address disparities, provide support to students, and create empowering and inclusive school environments. The findings of this study indicate that three key parties (parents, schools, and society) and six underlying causes are responsible for the disparities under investigation. This section presents recommendations for actions implementable at the school level to bring about improvements. The section also suggests ways the other two key parties, the parents and society, can contribute in collaboration with schools.

### **Equity Impact Assessment and Action Plan**

The first recommendation is to craft and put into action a comprehensive equity policy that articulates the school's unwavering dedication to rectifying disparities and championing impartiality for every student. The first step would be to acknowledge that disparities exist. Kate believed that the "school should work on acknowledging that disparities might exist" and that it may be part of the teachers' "job to pick up the slack regardless of the family advocating, and however exhausted the plans may be to encourage the student to get the services that they need." The IDEA mandates public schools to provide high-quality educational services and opportunities for students with special needs (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). This instruction can occur in various settings, including classrooms, homes, hospitals, and institutions (IDEA, 2019).

The recommendation for an equity impact assessment and action plan can help ensure that teachers and decision makers recognize the severity of the huge disparities among students of all races and ethnicities and take steps to address and stop the disparities (Aiyedogbon, 2020). Beliefs and practices of teachers should depend on an understanding of the cultural and historical

nature of disparities and gaps faced by racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs (Thorius, 2019). This recommendation emphasizes schools' commitment to addressing disparities and promoting fairness for all students. The initial step should be to recognize the existence of disparities, as advocated by Kate. She believed that schools should acknowledge disparities and take proactive steps to support students.

### **Strategies for Schools and Staff Development**

Ladson-Billings (1995) created the framework of culturally responsive teaching, stating in that culturally responsive teaching would improve academic achievement by holding high, transparent expectations for all students and supporting the development of their academic skills and identities as learners. Teachers should be culturally competent to affirm students' backgrounds and identify and foster the ability of students to understand and honor others' cultures (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Hammond (2015) and Ladson-Billings (1995) affirmed the necessity of partnering with students to identify, analyze, and work to solve systemic inequities in their communities and the world. Cindy acknowledged the limitations of her background:

I don't have the same background as my students. I come from a small town. I think I had two people of color in my class growing up. It's taken work for me to do my own work and talk to people and kind of work to be more aware.

To enhance the understanding and capabilities of staff members, school leaders should provide comprehensive professional development opportunities. This would encompass training sessions on equity, cultural competence, and addressing unconscious bias, enabling educators to effectively engage with diverse student populations. Rachel emphasized the need for "having training on how to support someone, whether it's a teacher or whatever role when a student

brings up something different or unique.” In line with the commitment to culturally responsive teaching, school leaders should further enrich teachers’ skill sets by offering specialized training in culturally responsive teaching practices and strategies. This would empower teachers to tailor their approaches to meet the diverse learning needs and backgrounds of their students.

Recognizing the importance of accurate identification, schools should establish regular training programs for teachers and counselors. This training would enable teachers and counselors to better identify learning and behavioral needs among diverse student populations, reducing the risk of improper diagnoses and ensuring the provision of more appropriate support. Reducing or eliminating disparities among students at intersections of ability, language, and race requires work on culturally responsive curriculum (Thorius et al., 2018).

This section recommended two actions for consideration by school leaders. These recommendations are just starting points. School leaders should tailor actions in their schools based on each school’s specific context, resources, and needs. Regular assessment by and collaboration with stakeholders—including students, parents, and community members—are crucial to implementing effective strategies to address disparities and create equitable learning environments. The next section discusses recommendations for further study.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of six primary and secondary teachers at one state-approved private special education school in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education. The study addressed the issue of racially and ethnically diverse students diagnosed with learning or emotional disorders in special education.



However, participant numbers, regional representation, and demographics limit the impact of this study. Further research is therefore recommended.

Future researchers could consider implementing longitudinal studies to track changes in disparities over time. Doing so could help uncover trends, patterns, and potential interventions that could lead to reduction or elimination of these disparities. Such studies could include investigation of how policies and institutional practices contribute to or mitigate disparities. They could also include analysis of how changes in policies, practices, and educational systems can address the underlying causes of disparities. Furthermore, they could involve studying the impact of providing educators with cultural competence training.

Future researchers could assess whether increased cultural awareness and sensitivity among educators result in improved support and engagement for racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional and learning disorders in special education. Researchers could investigate the impact of teacher training, professional development, and autonomy on fostering positive outcomes for all students. Future researcher can evaluate interventions aimed at transforming school policies, practices, and attitudes. This could lead to a more welcoming and supportive atmosphere for all students.

This section recommended longitudinal studies for further study. Such studies have the potential to track disparities over time, unearthing trends, patterns, and interventions that could contribute to reduction or elimination of disparities (Watts et al., 2019). Longitudinal research could involve a comprehensive exploration of policies, institutional practices, and changes in the educational landscape aimed at addressing the underlying causes of disparities. Furthermore, delving into the impact of providing educators with cultural competence training could foster

inclusive environments, thereby enhancing support and engagement for students from diverse backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight the existence of disparities and emphasize the ongoing need for research to address the issue of inequities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education. The literature review illuminated the intricate nature of this phenomenon, revealing its origins within systemic, historical, and societal domains. The findings successfully answered this study's research question and provide robust support for the themes examined in the literature review. The lived experiences gained from this study can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding disparities among students with emotional or learning disorders, prompting further exploration and potential interventions.

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[and-ethnicity-of-children-with-disabilities-served-under-idea-part-b/](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-fast-facts-race-and-ethnicity-of-children-with-disabilities-served-under-idea-part-b/)

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## APPENDIX A

## LETTER TO DIRECTOR REQUESTING PERMISSION

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am seeking your permission to utilize your school as the research site for my dissertation pursuant to earning a Doctor in Education at the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine. I am in the process of completing my dissertation, entitled “*Insights of Primary and Secondary Teachers in Connecticut Regarding Disparities among Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students in Special Education.*”

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study is to explore the insights of primary and secondary teachers in Connecticut regarding disparities among ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education,

I am looking for six teachers from different districts willing to participate in a recorded interview via Zoom, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Teacher participation is completely voluntary.

All teacher interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreeable time and will be conducted after contractual hours. The names of all participants, superintendents, districts, and schools collected for this study will remain confidential.

**At no time during the study process will any individuals, schools, or districts be identified.**

Additionally, no cost will be incurred by the teachers, the school, or the district.

If you permit me to reach out to the teachers to participate in this study, please sign the letter of support (see below) on your district letterhead and return it to me via email at [kheo@une.edu](mailto:kheo@une.edu).

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. I can be reached at [kheo@une.edu](mailto:kheo@une.edu). I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Keumok Heo

Doctoral Candidate, University of New England

## RECRUITMENT POST

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled "*Insights of Primary and Secondary Teachers in Connecticut regarding Disparities among Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students in Special Education*" for my dissertation. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study is to explore the insights of primary and secondary teachers in Connecticut regarding disparities among ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education.

I am seeking six participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you:

- are age 18 or older
- are currently employed as a teacher who teach students with special needs in Connecticut, either as a primary classroom teacher or as a teacher of an elective class such as music, art, physical education, and so on
- have three years or more of teaching experience for students with special needs in Connecticut.
- are currently employed at Maplewood Academy.

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than six people who express interest, only the first six will be selected for an interview. All data will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff will be de-identified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study, including confidentiality and privacy measures.

If you are interested in sharing your experience, please contact me via email at [kheo@une.edu](mailto:kheo@une.edu) and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above-listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Keumok Heo  
Doctoral Student  
University of New England

## Wait List Closed Letter to Potential Participants (to be sent via email)

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you very much for your willingness to participate in this research study. Your name was placed on a wait list, and at this point, all six participants have completed interviews. The limit for interviews has officially been reached so the wait list will now be destroyed for your privacy. I will not be moving forward with more interviews. I am very grateful for your consideration.

I hope the remainder of your year goes very well. Feel free to contact me with any questions at [yourname@une.edu](mailto:yourname@une.edu).

Thank you,

Keumok Heo  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of New England



## APPENDIX B

## UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND'S INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL


**Office of Research Integrity  
Institutional Review Board**

Biddeford Campus  
11 Hills Beach Road  
Biddeford, ME 04005  
(207) 602-2244 T  
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus  
716 Stevens Avenue  
Portland, ME 04103

**DATE OF LETTER:** June 30, 2023

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Keumok Heo  
**FACULTY ADVISOR:** Gizelle Luevano, EdD

**PROJECT NUMBER:** 0623-11  
**RECORD NUMBER:** 0623-11-01

**PROJECT TITLE:** INSIGHTS OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY TEACHERS IN CONNECTICUT REGARDING DISPARITIES AMONG RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

**SUBMISSION TYPE:** New Project  
**SUBMISSION DATE:** June 30, 2023

**ACTION:** Determination of Exempt Status  
**DECISION DATE:** June 30, 2023

**REVIEW CATEGORY:** Exemption Category # *2ii*

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

**If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.**

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu) and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS  
Director of Research Integrity

## APPENDIX C

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity  
Institutional Review Board

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**General Instructions****\*\*Delete this instructional table when you have completed the Information Sheet\*\***

Instructional text and/or guidance is in *blue italic font*. Before submission, please delete this box, blue instructional text, and information in this template that does not apply to your project.

- This template is primarily designed for exempt projects that involve interviews and surveys (exempt category 2), but can be modified to account for other types of allowable exempt projects including educational research (exempt category 1) and benign behavioral interventions (exempt category 3).
- The Information Sheet must be written in lay language using 2<sup>nd</sup> person point of view (e.g., you will be asked to complete an anonymous survey). The use of jargon, including any complex terms or concepts should be avoided. All acronyms or abbreviations must be defined the first time they are used. Avoid the use of lengthy paragraphs. For additional guidance, view the [PRISM Readability Toolkit](#).

Contact the Office of Research Integrity at [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu) if you have questions or need further assistance.

Version Date:	<i>06/27/2023</i>
IRB Project #:	<i>0623-11</i>
Title of Project:	INSIGHTS OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY TEACHERS IN CONNECTICUT REGARDING DISPARITIES AMONG RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION
Principal Investigator (PI):	Keumok Heo
PI Contact Information:	<a href="mailto:Kheo@une.edu">Kheo@une.edu</a> , 860-671-8371

## INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.

**For IRB Office Use Only – Do Not Alter or Delete**

RES-T-001; Rev 1; Effective Date: 11/14/2022

- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word 'we' in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study is to explore the insights of primary and secondary teachers in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education (Cavendish et al., 2018; Leung, 2021).

Six participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the Principal Investigator (PI)'s dissertation research.

### **WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?**

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you:

1. are age 18 or older
2. are currently employed as a teacher who teaches students with special needs in Connecticut, either as a primary classroom teacher or as a teacher of an elective class such as music, art, physical education, and so on
3. have three years or more teaching experience for students with special needs in Connecticut.
4. are currently employed at Raymond Hill School.

### **WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?**

- You will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 30-45 minutes over Zoom.
- You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have five calendar days to respond or the PI will assume that you have no comments and the transcript will be assumed to be accurate.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

<p><b>For IRB Office Use Only – Do Not Alter or Delete</b> RES-T-001; Rev 1; Effective Date: 11/14/2022</p>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------



INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the ‘WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?’ section below for additional steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

There may be no direct benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help teachers understand who work with racially and ethnically diverse students with learning or emotional disorders in primary and secondary educational settings.

### **WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

### **WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?**

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one on one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without your consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by you for accuracy before they are added to the study.
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants, and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.
- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- You will be given the option to turn off your camera during Zoom interview.
- After you have verified the accuracy of your transcribed interview the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all transcripts have been verified by the participants of this project, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.

- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- No data, deidentified or in aggregate, will be shared with the site (school district) leadership.
- All data collected will be stored on a password-protected computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

**WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?**

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

**WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

**WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?**

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity of University of New England at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu)

## APPENDIX D

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me about yourself as a teacher, such as years of experience, teaching subjects, grades, places, etc.?
2. If you are comfortable, please tell me how you describe your racial and ethnic self-identity.
3. What motivated you to pursue a career in teaching?
4. How do you perceive and experience the implementation of the equity requirements in special education as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?
5. Please describe the racial and ethnic diversity among the students in your program.
6. Please describe the racial and ethnic diversity among the stakeholders in your school, such as the board of education, administrators, and parent-teacher organization.
7. Has the racial and ethnic diversity among the students in special education changed since you first started teaching? Why or why not?
8. What are your perceptions about the disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students diagnosed with emotional or learning disorders?
9. What are your insights about the school's effort to improve disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students, especially in emotional or learning disorders?
10. Do you believe that schools should work on reducing disparities? Why or why not?
11. Have you ever taught using a culturally and racially competent curriculum, program, or lesson? If so, please share your experience.

12. What measures would you suggest for addressing disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students in teacher evaluations?
13. Would you like to add anything to the interview before we conclude?

## APPENDIX E

## INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND GUIDES

**Script prior to the interviewee:** Thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview aspect of my study. As mentioned, my study seeks to explore *Insights of primary and secondary teachers in Connecticut regarding disparities among racially and ethnically diverse students with emotional or learning disorders in special education*. Our interview today will last between 30 -45 minutes (**Review Participant Information Sheet with participant**).

Do you verbally agree to participate in my study and let me record your Zoom interview?

**If yes:** Thank you. I will begin recording your interview. **If no:** (Stop the interview). The interview will stop and the data collected will be destroyed. Thank you for coming to the interview.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? (Answer the questions). If any questions arise at any point in this interview, feel free to ask them. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

(Interview questions)

**After the Interview:** Thank you so much for participating in the interview. I would like to reiterate that your responses and personal information will be kept confidential. Upon completion of the audio recording, the transcripts will be sent to you for your review for accuracy. You have the right to edit and/or delete your responses as member checking. You will have five calendar days to review your transcripts. If I do not hear back from you on calendar day six, then I will assume that you have no comments, and the transcript will be assumed to be accurate. I look forward to discussing it further in the future. Thank you.