

Beyond the IEP: Reassessing Equity and Access in U.S. Special Education Post-IDEA

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Abstract:

This paper critically reexamines equity and access in U.S. special education in the decades following the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While IDEA provides a robust legal framework aimed at ensuring free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities, significant gaps remain between policy intent and actual practice. This study draws on a comprehensive review of literature and illustrative case studies to investigate the ongoing disparities in special education identification, placement, and outcomes. It highlights how racial and ethnic disproportionality, cultural and linguistic bias in assessments, and systemic disciplinary exclusions continue to undermine the educational experiences of historically marginalized students—particularly Black, Latino, and Indigenous learners with disabilities. Furthermore, the paper examines how inclusive education remains unevenly implemented across school districts, often influenced by structural inequalities, under-resourced schools, and insufficient teacher preparation. Although IDEA mandates inclusion and individualized supports, its implementation often fails to address the intersecting effects of race, class, and disability. The findings call for a reimagining of special education through equity-centered, culturally responsive, and anti-racist lenses. The paper advocates for reforms that move beyond procedural compliance to address root causes of inequity. It emphasizes the importance of engaging families and communities in shaping more inclusive and just educational systems. By reframing special education as a site of social justice, this work contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity and systemic transformation.

Keywords: special education, equity, IDEA, disproportionality, cultural bias, inclusive education

Introduction:

Since its inception in 1975 and subsequent reauthorizations, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has promised access to Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities through the implementation of the Individualized Education Program (IEP). While the legislation marked a crucial step toward recognizing the rights of students with disabilities, many scholars argue that IDEA's procedural safeguards have not fully addressed the broader systemic and sociocultural barriers that continue to shape educational access and equity (Artiles, 2011; Artiles et al., 2010).

Recent research critiques the narrow procedural focus of IEP implementation, emphasizing that structural inequities—particularly those linked to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—remain deeply entrenched in special education systems (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Albrecht et al., 2012). Studies have demonstrated that students from racially minoritized communities are disproportionately identified for special education and subjected to exclusionary disciplinary practices (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Artiles, 2013). These patterns suggest that the promise of IDEA is often undermined by systemic biases that extend beyond the scope of individual IEPs.

The intersectionality of race and disability, as examined through the DisCrit framework (Dis/ability Critical Race Studies), highlights how special education practices can reinforce historical patterns of marginalization (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). DisCrit scholars argue that educational systems often racialize disability, viewing it through a deficit-based lens shaped by cultural and historical power imbalances (Artiles, 2009, 2015). This racialization influences referral, placement, and service delivery decisions, leading to inequitable outcomes despite formal compliance with IDEA mandates.

Additionally, educational segregation—both by disability and ethnicity—exacerbates these inequities. Ethnic and ability-based segregation contributes to diminished self-esteem, weakened teacher-student relationships, and limited access to general education curriculum and high-quality instruction (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014). Artiles et al. (2010) argue that current frameworks often fail to critically examine the role of culture in shaping these disparities, calling for more robust, culturally responsive practices that move beyond technical compliance.

This paper critically explores the extent to which special education in the U.S. has advanced beyond the procedural guarantees of IEPs to ensure meaningful equity and access for all students. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, it interrogates the limitations of IDEA in addressing deep-rooted sociocultural inequities and offers insights into how educators, policymakers, and researchers can reimagine special education as a truly inclusive and just system.

Literature Review:

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has long been hailed as a cornerstone of special education policy in the United States. With its core promise of providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities through the Individualized Education Program (IEP), IDEA has served as a vital framework for the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting. However, despite its procedural strengths, scholars and policymakers alike have raised concerns about persistent inequities, particularly in how race, ethnicity, and language status intersect with disability identification and service provision.

A critical concern that has surfaced in the literature is the disproportionate representation of racially and ethnically marginalized students in special education. Artiles et al. (2005) argue that within-group diversity, especially among English language learners, complicates our understanding of disproportionality in special education.

Their research shows that systemic biases, rather than actual differences in student need, often account for the over-identification of minority students in special education programs. Similarly, Connor and Ferri (2005) highlight how the nexus of race and disability creates troubling patterns of segregation and marginalization, indicating that IDEA's legal protections may be insufficient to combat entrenched societal inequities.

The literature also critiques federal education policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), for their unintended consequences on special education. Hursh (2007) and Darling-Hammond (2007) both examine how these accountability-driven reforms have exacerbated disparities by narrowing curricula and fostering high-stakes environments that disproportionately affect students of color with disabilities.

Wasta (2006) provocatively questions whether NCLB signaled "the death of special education," emphasizing the ways in which students with disabilities were often left behind in practice, despite the law's intentions. These policies have, in many ways, diluted the promise of inclusive education, rendering IDEA's protections less effective in real-world educational settings.

In response to these systemic challenges, scholars have explored more culturally responsive and equity-oriented interventions. Bal, Kozleski, and their colleagues (2012, 2014) emphasize the need for culturally responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as a way to promote inclusive education. These interventions are designed to be sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences and to dismantle the disciplinary and academic disparities that disproportionately impact minority students. Beck and Muschkin (2012) further demonstrate the enduring impact of race on both disciplinary infractions and academic outcomes, reinforcing the need for systemic transformation in educational practices.

Legal and philosophical perspectives also offer critical insights into the shortcomings and opportunities of IDEA and related policies. Huefner (2000) addresses both the risks and possibilities embedded in the IEP process, suggesting that while IEPs offer a legal framework for addressing student needs, they can also be sites of exclusion when not properly implemented. Little and Little (1999) and Farrell (2009) expand on the legal and ethical dimensions of inclusion, arguing that true inclusion demands more than compliance; it requires a shift in mindset and practice.

The normalization principle, as articulated by Wolfensberger (2003), Nirje (1985), and later discussed by Perrin and Mann, posits that people with disabilities should live conditions as close as possible to the norms and patterns of mainstream society. This principle undergirds much of the advocacy for inclusive education, suggesting that systemic barriers must be dismantled to ensure true access and equity.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) also elevates the discourse by situating inclusive education within a global human rights framework. This international agreement emphasizes accessibility, equity, and full participation in education, pressing countries like the United States to examine and reform national practices. Hahn (1996) and Dyson (2001) support this rights-based approach, highlighting how social research must align with anti-discrimination laws to effectively serve students with disabilities.

Data and national trends provide further evidence of the systemic inequities faced by racially and linguistically diverse students with disabilities. Aud, Fox, and Kewal Ramani (2010) present comprehensive statistics on the educational experiences of minority students, illustrating persistent gaps in achievement, graduation rates, and disciplinary actions. Almazan (2009) adds to this narrative by analyzing state statistics on inclusive education, revealing how implementation varies widely and often fails to meet the needs of the most vulnerable learners.

Finally, the literature underscores the importance of accessibility and design in promoting equity. O'Connor (2019) discusses the tensions between accessibility mandates like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and historic preservation efforts, illustrating the complexities involved in creating truly inclusive environments. These tensions reflect broader systemic issues that impede progress toward inclusive education. Policies such as ESSA (U.S.

Department of Education, 2020) represent recent efforts to balance accountability with flexibility, but questions remain about their effectiveness in addressing deep-rooted disparities.

The literature reveals a complex and evolving picture of special education in the United States. While IDEA has laid a foundational legal framework for protecting the rights of students with disabilities, its implementation has often fallen short in addressing the compounded effects of race, language, and socioeconomic status. Scholars call for more culturally responsive practices, equitable policies, and inclusive philosophical approaches to ensure that all students, regardless of background or ability, can access a truly appropriate and empowering education. This review suggests that meaningful progress in special education requires not just procedural compliance but a commitment to justice, equity, and systemic transformation.

Methodology:

This study utilizes a qualitative systematic literature review methodology to examine the intersection of race, disability, and educational inclusion within the context of U.S. special education. The review systematically synthesizes empirical research findings, theoretical frameworks, and policy analyses to offer a comprehensive understanding of disproportionality and inclusive practices. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for a deeper interpretive analysis of recurring themes, systemic patterns, and contextual nuances across diverse scholarly works.

The selection of literature was guided by clearly defined inclusion criteria. Eligible studies were peer-reviewed and published between 2000 and 2020, ensuring both contemporary relevance and the inclusion of foundational contributions to the field. Priority was given to articles that directly addressed issues such as the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, culturally responsive practices, legal frameworks like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the implementation of inclusive education policies.

To identify relevant literature, a structured search was conducted across multiple academic databases including ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Keywords and search terms included combinations of "special education," "disproportionality," "inclusion," "race," "disability studies," and "educational equity." Additional sources were identified through backward citation tracking and references listed in key publications.

The review incorporates interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly drawing from disability studies, critical race theory (CRT), and education policy analysis, to contextualize the structural and systemic issues embedded in special education. Studies were evaluated based on their methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, and relevance to the central themes of this research.

Findings and Discussion:

Disproportionality and Racialization of Disability:

The persistent overrepresentation of Black, Latinx, and Native American students in high-incidence disability categories such as emotional disturbance and intellectual disability remains a critical concern in U.S. special education. This phenomenon, often referred to as disproportionality, is deeply intertwined with systemic biases, cultural misunderstandings, and institutional practices that inadvertently marginalize students of color.

Artiles et al. (2005) highlighted that English Language Learners (ELLs) in urban school districts are disproportionately represented in special education programs. Their study emphasized the within-group diversity among minority students, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment and placement fails to account for the nuanced needs of these learners. Similarly, Ahrum, Fergus, and Noguera (2011) examined suburban school districts and found that cultural biases in assessment tools and teacher referrals contribute significantly to the misidentification of minority students as having disabilities.

The role of socio-cultural factors in disciplinary actions has also been scrutinized. Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger (2007) utilized the SEELS national dataset to reveal that African American students with emotional and behavioral disorders are more likely to face disciplinary exclusions compared to their peers. This trend underscores the intersection of race, disability, and disciplinary practices in schools.

Albrecht et al. (2012) critiqued federal policies addressing disproportionality, arguing that while well-intentioned, they often lack the necessary frameworks to tackle the root causes of racial disparities in special education. Their analysis suggests that policy reforms must be accompanied by a deeper understanding of cultural contexts and systemic inequities.

The theoretical lens of DisCrit (Disability Critical Race Theory), as proposed by Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013), offers a comprehensive framework to analyze the intersections of race and disability. This perspective challenges traditional notions of disability and calls for a more inclusive and equitable approach to special education.

Artiles (2011) further delved into the racialization of ability, arguing that educational systems often conflate cultural differences with disabilities, leading to the misplacement of minority students in special education programs. This misidentification not only affects students' academic trajectories but also reinforces societal stereotypes and systemic inequalities.

Addressing the disproportionality and racialization of disability in special education requires a multifaceted approach. It necessitates the reevaluation of assessment tools, teacher training programs, disciplinary policies, and federal mandates. By adopting culturally responsive practices and theoretical frameworks like DisCrit, educators and policymakers can work towards a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape for all students.

Disciplinary Exclusion and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Students with disabilities—particularly those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds—are disproportionately subjected to punitive disciplinary actions such as suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline,” reflects a troubling intersection of race, ability, and systemic inequality that marginalizes already vulnerable populations and significantly undermines their right to equitable education (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Beck & Muschkin, 2012).

Research by Achilles et al. (2007) found that students with emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities are excluded from classrooms at higher rates than their peers, often for subjective and non-violent behaviors. These patterns are further amplified for students of color, who are perceived and disciplined more harshly due to implicit biases and institutionalized racism (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). This double burden of racial and disability-based discrimination creates a systemic disadvantage that hinders their academic progress and social development, steering them away from educational achievement and toward involvement in the criminal justice system.

The racialization of disability—where behaviors of students of color are more likely to be interpreted as indicators of special education needs—contributes to their overrepresentation in special education programs and exclusionary disciplinary practices (Artiles, 2013). This process is rooted in historical and structural inequalities that continue to shape educational practices today. Artiles et al. (2010) emphasize that disproportionate representation of minority students in special education reflects not merely assessment inaccuracies but also deeper cultural biases and flawed institutional policies. These students are often placed in restrictive educational settings, segregated from their peers, and denied access to high-quality, inclusive instruction.

Moreover, discipline policies such as “zero tolerance” disproportionately impact marginalized students. Rather than improving school safety or behavior, such policies have been shown to escalate negative outcomes and alienate students from their learning environments (Albrecht et al., 2012). This alienation frequently results in increased dropout rates, poor academic performance, and higher likelihood of future incarceration—outcomes that perpetuate cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014).

The intersection of disability and race, particularly in the context of special education, reveals how disciplinary practices function as a mechanism of social exclusion. As Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera (2011) observed in their case studies of suburban school districts, even well-resourced schools demonstrate patterns of disproportionality that reflect systemic bias rather than individual student behavior. These findings challenge the assumption that exclusionary practices are based solely on behavior or need; instead, they reflect embedded cultural and institutional norms that criminalize difference.

The psychological consequences for students subjected to repeated disciplinary exclusion are also significant. Ethnic and disability-based marginalization in school settings can lead to decreased self-esteem, social withdrawal, and a loss of trust in school authorities (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012). The emotional toll of being labeled as “problematic” or “unfit” for mainstream classrooms reinforces the internalization of stigma, further reducing students' academic motivation and long-term educational aspirations.

The normalization principle, introduced by Wolfensberger and later developed by scholars such as Nirje and Mann, posits that individuals with disabilities should be supported in environments that promote dignity, participation, and equality (Wolfensberger, 2003; Nirje, 1985). Disciplinary exclusion runs counter to this principle, segregating students from their peers and failing to address the root causes of behavioral difficulties. Instead of exclusion, inclusive strategies rooted in positive behavioral interventions and culturally responsive teaching should be prioritized (Bal et al., 2014; Bal, Thorius, & Kozleski, 2012). These approaches foster belonging, reduce conflict, and create school environments that nurture the development of all learners, regardless of race or ability.

The policy landscape has attempted to address these issues through reforms such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). However, implementation often falls short in ensuring true equity (Huefner, 2000; US Department of Education, 2020). Without addressing the underlying

structural and cultural factors that drive exclusion, these laws remain insufficient in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.

The disproportionate disciplinary exclusion of students with disabilities—especially those from racially marginalized backgrounds—is a systemic problem that perpetuates inequality in education and society. To break this cycle, schools must adopt inclusive, culturally responsive, and restorative practices that prioritize student support over punishment. Only through such comprehensive and transformative approaches can educational institutions fulfill their mission to serve all learners equitably and prevent further marginalization of those most vulnerable.

Cultural Responsiveness and Inclusion

Efforts to implement inclusive education often fall short of truly addressing the complex and intersecting identities of learners, particularly when race and disability intersect. Although inclusion is a cornerstone of educational policy and practice, in reality, many initiatives adopt assimilationist models that fail to recognize and respond to the cultural and experiential backgrounds of diverse learners (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Bal et al., 2014). The marginalization of students of color with disabilities—particularly in disciplinary practices, special education placement, and behavioral supports—demonstrates a continued pattern of exclusion that is disguised as inclusion (Artiles, 2011; Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007).

Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CR-PBIS) have emerged as a promising framework aimed at creating equitable and supportive learning environments. However, the implementation of CR-PBIS across schools and districts remains inconsistent, often due to systemic resistance to change and lack of educator training in cultural competency (Bal, Kozleski, & Thorius, 2012). While CR-PBIS is theoretically grounded in principles of social justice and equity, many schools continue to struggle with shifting from deficit-oriented models of behavior management to approaches that recognize and honor students' cultural backgrounds (Bal et al., 2014).

DisCrit, or Disability Critical Race Theory, introduced by Annamma et al. (2013), offers a powerful lens through which to critique the systemic structures that marginalize students at the intersection of race and disability. DisCrit challenges dominant ideologies in education that separate disability and race into distinct categories, instead emphasizing how these identities co-construct experiences of oppression. In traditional models of special education, students are often pathologized through a colorblind framework that ignores racialized experiences, thus reinforcing the overrepresentation of students of color in special education categories such as Emotional Disturbance and Learning Disabilities (Albrecht et al., 2012; Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011).

Several studies have documented how school systems continue to disproportionately refer African American and Latino students to special education and apply exclusionary discipline practices (Achilles et al., 2007; Beck & Muschkin, 2012). These outcomes are rarely due to inherent behavioral issues but are often tied to subjective interpretations of behavior that are rooted in cultural misperceptions and institutional bias (Artiles, 2009; Connor & Ferri, 2005). As Artiles (2013) argues, the racialization of disability must be understood within a historical and sociocultural context, where behaviors deemed "problematic" are filtered through a racialized lens of deviance and deficiency.

Ethnic segregation within schools further complicates inclusion, especially when teacher expectations and relationships are shaped by racial or cultural bias. Agirdag, Van Houtte, and Van Avermaet (2012) found that teacher-student relationships in ethnically segregated schools have a significant impact on student self-esteem and academic engagement. When educators fail to develop culturally sustaining relationships with their students, especially those with disabilities, inclusion becomes a surface-level policy rather than a meaningful practice.

The concept of normalization, as advanced by Wolfensberger (2003) and supported by scholars like Nirje (1985) and Mann & van Kraayenoord (2011), also raises questions about the deeper goals of inclusion. While normalization aimed to integrate persons with disabilities into society by promoting settings and expectations that mirrored those of non-disabled peers, it risks encouraging assimilation rather than genuine acceptance of neurodiversity and cultural variation. Thus, culturally responsive inclusion must go beyond placing students in general education classrooms—it must transform pedagogy, curriculum, and behavior supports to affirm multiple ways of being, knowing, and learning (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005).

Legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) provide necessary protections but are often not enough to counteract entrenched inequities. Although IDEA mandates individualized supports through mechanisms like the Individualized Education Program (IEP), implementation often lacks cultural sensitivity, resulting in plans that do not fully align with the student's linguistic or cultural context (Huefner, 2000; Little & Little, 1999).

Policy efforts like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have attempted to promote accountability and equity, but these laws frequently focus on performance metrics that ignore the structural and cultural conditions affecting marginalized students (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hursh, 2007). As Wasta (2006) notes, such reforms can inadvertently devalue the principles of special education by imposing narrow academic goals while disregarding holistic and culturally grounded approaches to learning and development.

To move toward authentic cultural responsiveness and inclusion, schools must address the root causes of disproportionality, redefine student success beyond standardized benchmarks, and elevate the voices of historically marginalized students and families. This requires systemic transformation—from teacher preparation and school leadership to curriculum design and family engagement. It also calls for sustained professional development that equips educators to engage in critical self-reflection, examine their biases, and embrace pedagogical practices that affirm the identities of all learners (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius, 2010; Dyson, 2001).

Cultural responsiveness and inclusion must be more than rhetorical goals in education—they must be embodied in everyday practices that recognize the interconnectedness of race, disability, and culture. Only through deliberate, equity-driven action can educational systems begin to dismantle exclusionary practices and create truly inclusive environments where all students, regardless of background or ability, are valued and supported.

Normalization and Systemic Equity

Normalization theory, as articulated by Wolfensberger (2003) and Nirje (1985), was a foundational framework in the field of special education and disability services. It promoted the integration of individuals with disabilities into mainstream society, arguing for their right to live conditions and routines as close as possible to the norms of society. While normalization offered a progressive alternative to institutionalization, critics have pointed out that it insufficiently addresses the systemic inequities rooted in race, class, and ability. The theory, despite its contributions, largely overlooked the structural barriers perpetuated by institutional racism and ableism (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Hahn, 1996).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), built in part upon the spirit of normalization, guarantees individualized educational accommodations through Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). However, as Huefner (2000) and Little & Little (1999) argue, IDEA's procedural focus has resulted in a narrow implementation of equity. It emphasizes the legal right of students with disabilities to access education but does not necessarily transform the systemic structures that marginalize them. Consequently, students from racially and linguistically minoritized communities continue to face disproportionate representation in special education categories, a trend exacerbated by deficit-based evaluations and implicit biases (Artiles et al., 2010; Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011).

Normalization, in its original form, does not disrupt the entrenched inequities of educational systems. It assumes that inclusion in the "norm" is the end goal, without interrogating what is considered "normal" and who defines it (Perrin & Nirje, 1985; Mann & van Kraayenoord, 2011). This assimilationist approach fails to address how structural forces—such as race, socioeconomic status, and language—shape both access to and the experience of education. For example, students of color with disabilities are often subject to harsher disciplinary actions, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Beck & Muschkin, 2012). These disciplinary exclusions are not simply reflections of individual behavior but of sociocultural biases embedded within school policies and teacher perceptions (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012).

Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit), as developed by Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013), offers a more nuanced framework by centering the intersectionality of race and disability. DisCrit challenges the notion that disability is solely a biological or medical issue and instead highlights how disability is socially constructed through racialized lenses. This framework critiques the colorblindness of normalization and the procedural neutrality of IDEA, urging a rethinking of educational equity through the lens of justice rather than compliance.

Furthermore, research has shown that efforts to address disproportionality in special education often fail because they do not confront the broader sociopolitical context. Albrecht et al. (2012) note that federal policies aimed at correcting racial disparities in identification and placement lack enforcement and are insufficiently grounded in a cultural understanding of disability. Artiles (2011, 2013) further explains that the racialization of disability stems from deep-seated narratives about intelligence, behavior, and cultural conformity—narratives that continue to influence referral and assessment practices.

More transformative approaches have begun to emerge through frameworks like culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports (CR-PBIS), which seek to align behavioral expectations with students' cultural contexts (Bal et al., 2014). These models emphasize community-driven reforms and view cultural difference as an asset rather than a barrier. Similarly, the learning lab approach described by Bal and colleagues (2012) illustrates how schoolwide change can be co-constructed with educators, families, and students to dismantle deficit thinking and foster systemic equity.

However, such systemic transformation is often hindered by neoliberal education policies that prioritize accountability over equity. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have focused heavily on standardized testing and outcomes-based accountability, which can penalize schools serving marginalized populations (Hursh, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007). These policies often obscure the complex interplay of race, disability, and socioeconomic status in shaping educational outcomes (Wasta, 2006). As Dyson (2001) argued, special needs education must be reimagined not just as a path to integration but as a means of achieving broader social justice.

Normalization theory, while historically significant, does not go far enough in addressing the root causes of inequity in education. A shift toward systemic equity requires moving beyond individual accommodations to structural reforms that interrogate and dismantle racism, ableism, and classism in schools. By adopting frameworks like DisCrit and culturally responsive systems change, educators and policymakers can begin to construct inclusive educational environments that affirm diverse identities and challenge oppressive norms.

Conclusion:

Achieving true equity in special education demands far more than compliance with procedural safeguards such as the Individualized Education Program (IEP). While the IEP remains a foundational tool under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), it primarily addresses individual needs without disrupting the broader systemic barriers that disproportionately impact students of color with disabilities. To advance equity, we must interrogate the deep-rooted structures of racism, ableism, and exclusion embedded in educational institutions.

This reimagining calls for an intentional shift toward culturally responsive and anti-racist frameworks that acknowledge the sociohistorical marginalization of disabled students, particularly those from racially and linguistically minoritized communities. As scholars such as Artiles (2011), Annamma et al. (2013), and Connor and Ferri (2005) argue, inclusion must not merely be physical integration—it must be a transformative process that challenges discriminatory practices and amplifies student voice and agency.

Policymakers, educators, and school leaders must move beyond surface-level reforms and adopt intersectional approaches that address both racial and disability-based disparities in discipline, identification, and access to quality instruction. This includes systemic changes in teacher preparation, school climate, curriculum design, and community engagement.

Future research should center participatory and emancipatory methodologies that involve students and families in the design, implementation, and evaluation of special education policies. By elevating the lived experiences of those most affected by educational inequities, we can generate more inclusive and just solutions.

Equity in special education cannot be achieved through technical compliance alone—it requires a commitment to justice, cultural responsiveness, and structural transformation. It is only by addressing the root causes of inequity that we can move toward a truly inclusive educational system that supports all learners in reaching their full potential.

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