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IS SPECIAL EDUCATION A LIFE SENTENCE? EXAMINING DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE DECLASSIFICATION RATES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

IS SPECIAL EDUCATION A LIFE SENTENCE? EXAMINING DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE DECLASSIFICATION RATES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Rasheed Bility

Federal law mandates that students suspected of having a disability must meet initial eligibility requirements to qualify for special education services. Furthermore, an individual education program (IEP) team is required by federal law to re-evaluate each student with a disability tri-annually to assess their ongoing need for such services. The pathway toward initial eligibility is explicitly outlined within federal legislation; however, the law does not explain, in detail, an avenue for declassification. As a result, many students may remain in special education when they no longer require its' specialized instruction or related services. The reality is that special education has evolved into a trapdoor, not a doorway to opportunity - as it was intended to be (Maydosz, 2014).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions of members of the committee on special education (CSE) and the subcommittee of special education (SCSE) about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. The study examined whether a relationship existed between perceptions of race and ability and the disproportionate declassification rates in an urban school district. The study explored this phenomenon through a conceptual framework that synthesizes

Ladson-Billings' (2007) four forms of educational debt. The conceptual framework framed the discussion of the theoretical framework, Connor et al. (2016) Dis/ability Critical Race Studies in Education (DisCrit).

The researcher conducted one-on-one and semi-structured interviews with five administrators, seven general education teachers, three special education department chairs, four general education teachers, and one school counselor. Findings suggest that among CSE members, there are (a) mixed perceptions and attitudes toward declassification, (b) variances in the understanding of the declassification and special education process, (c) a myriad of experiences, biases, and perceptions about race and ability exist that may influence declassification, (d) an understanding that multiple factors influence declassification, (e) the belief that declassification is rare, (f) an understanding that multiple factors influence declassification, (g) an emphasis on mainstreaming within the urban school district, and (h) an acceptance that barriers exist that prevent educational stakeholders from accurately assessing students' abilities.

Keywords: disproportionality, declassification, special education teacher, dis/ability, disability, race, students of color, Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Phyllis Diane Moore, the backbone of my family. You are the reason for my existence. I love you.

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It is difficult to believe that my pursuit of obtaining my doctorate has come full circle. This dissertation represents many years of hard work, dedication, challenges, failures, and successes. As I reflect on this voyage, I am consumed by memories of inspiration, encouragement, and support. I humbly share this achievement with all those who invested time and energy in me. This project would not have been possible if not for the effort and interest of many. For this reason, collectively, we celebrate.

I greatly appreciate my participants. Your stories continue to move me. I am deeply honored to have had the opportunity to listen and learn from your experiences. Your words are now part of me, and for that, I am eternally thankful.

I am so grateful to my family. Lucerny, my fiancé, you were present for all of the joys and pains during this process, and your love, patience, and unwavering support shined, motivating me to finish. Mommy, you are my foundation. I aspire to impact the world in a meaningful way because of your sacrifices and resilience. Richard (Dad) and Denise, I am truly lucky to have inherited a second set of parents that would go to the end of the galaxy for me and have instilled in me the courage to do great things. To Ms. LaJuan White, my middle school Biology teacher turned mentor, colleague, and friend, thank you for continuing to believe in and inspire me. Lastly, I must also thank all of the teachers and administrators that have left an indelible mark on me and the students I have subsequently taught throughout my career. I have worked relentlessly to make all of you proud.

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A dissertation is a task that is daunting enough on its own but trying to complete a dissertation amid a global pandemic has seemed, on occasion, nearly impossible. I have been delayed, distracted, discouraged, and diverted but never deterred. I am in awe of all the ways that so many people have gone above and beyond these extraordinarily challenging times to help me achieve this goal. I am forever indebted, and my promise to all of you is that I will pay it forward.

Lastly, I end with my biggest takeaway during this journey. To complete herculean tasks, dream with ambition, execute strategically, and lead with conviction.

EPIGRAPH

"The country is in deep trouble. We've forgotten that a rich life consists fundamentally of serving others, trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. We need the courage to question the powers that be, the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people, the courage to fight for social justice. In many instances, we will be stepping out on nothing and just hoping to land on something. But that's the struggle. To live is to wrestle with despair, yet never allow despair to have the last word."

- Cornel West

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Educating students with disabilities (SWD) requires pedagogues to learn and practice many skills due to the legal mandates and responsibilities placed upon school districts by federal education law. While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) explicitly specifies the process for obtaining special education and related services (Figure 1), it does not clearly outline guidelines for exiting the special education system (Dragoo & McLaughlin, 2013). IDEA (2004) relinquishes the responsibility of declassification and its associated processes to local school districts. It states that each board of education or board of trustees shall adopt a written policy that establishes administrative practices and procedures for the appropriate declassification of students with disabilities and must include: (a) the regular consideration for declassifying students when appropriate; (b) a reevaluation of the student before declassification; and (c) the provision of educational and support services to the student upon declassification (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Despite its explicit eligibility requirements, this ambiguity in federal declassification guidelines may lead to students qualifying for special education without a clear path to leave it. According to *The Condition of Education* 2020, between 2011–12 and 2018–19, the number of students who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) increased from 6.4 million to 7.1 million. The percentage served increased from

13 percent of total public-school enrollment to 14 percent of total public school enrollment (National Center for Education Statics, 2020). There has been a significant increase in the number of students who receive special education services. Many of these students will continue to receive these services and consequently continue to be labeled as an SWD for their educational careers, even when services may no longer be needed. The detainment of these particular students in special education is debilitating and counterproductive to the height and speed of students' educational trajectory; it is a direct violation of the free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities (FAPE) provisions under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, outlined in The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004). With the above legislation and special education purposes in mind and considering that students of color are declassified at lower rates than their white counterparts (Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study or SEELS, 2005), one must question whether these students are receiving a free appropriate public education (FAPE). This is because "when warranted, special education services are indeed helpful. When unwarranted, students suffer, as does our educational system and nation," further cultivating socio-economic and educational injustice (Ford, 2012, p. 403).

The federal government collects extensive information on students with disabilities who receive special education services but comparatively little information on those who exit special education. Similarly, the literature on students who receive special education services is comprehensive, while those who exit or are declassified from special education remain limited. The reality is students are being

identified, referred, and deemed eligible for special education services; however, they continue to receive these services with minimal incentive to return to general education (Mathes et al., 1998). Collective decisions regarding a student's eligibility for special education services must be made devoid of preconceived notions and without bias. Ultimately, these decisions must be made in the best interest of students and their specific learning needs. If found eligible for services, it must be paramount for school districts that a child receives services in the least restrictive environment and are not excluded from participating in the general education setting based solely on his/her future disability (IDEA, 2004).

For this reason, educators and policymakers must assess the effectiveness of their efforts to educate children with disabilities, as special education should not be a life sentence. Further, and perhaps more important, it is critical that educational stakeholders and advocates conscientiously create and strictly monitor policies and procedures that identify students who are candidates for declassification to assure that they receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). It is educationally and professionally irresponsible for local districts to confine students to special education to move them along the special education continuum or discontinue special education services.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE, specifically educational administrators, general and special education teachers, and related service providers (school psychologists, speech-language pathologists,

guidance counselors, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists), about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. The study examined whether a relationship existed between perceptions of race and ability and the disproportionate declassification rates in urban school districts.

The researcher employed two theoretical lenses in conducting the study: Ladson-Billings' (2007) educational debt and Dis/ability Critical Race Studies in Education (DisCrit) as outlined by Connor et al. (2016). The researcher employed Moustakas's qualitative research methodology of phenomenology and used in-depth one-on-one semi-structured virtual interviews to collect data on participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The study served as a vehicle and foundation for education advocates and policymakers to engage in data-informed, authentic, courageous, yet productive discourse about improving school systems into those that meet students' specific needs. Specifically, the study sought to inspire vigilant activism in educators to (a) reimagine the conventional management of students with learning dis/abilities and (b) eradicate the practice of inappropriately referring, confining, and detaining students of color in special education.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework through which a researcher views a phenomenon affects the resulting interpretation. In her seminal American Educational Research Association (AERA) presidential address, Ladson-Billings (2007) offered a comprehensive analysis of the state of education in the United States. She argued that a focus on the national achievement gap (disparities in standardized test scores

between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrant and White students) is misplaced. Instead, she urged that we must focus on what she coined and identified as the four forms of educational debt that have accumulated over time—economic, historical, sociopolitical, and moral—that negatively impact students of color. A study of young students of color must account for the aforementioned interrelated debts they inherit due to living in a country founded on slavery. Even today, the violence of colonialism influences all aspects of a student of color's day-to-day life.

Theoretical Framework

As it relates to race/ethnicity, race did not affect declassification rates in more recent studies, such as the Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study (PEELS: Daley & Carlson, 2009) and the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS: SRI International, 2005); however, historically, there have been lower declassification rates of students of color in urban school districts as compared with White students (Connor et al., 2016). The researcher employed DisCrit as the primary theoretical framework for this study. This theory served as a lens and as the nexus between race, ability, and the historically lower declassification rates of students of color in urban school districts than White students (Connor et al., 2016).

The tenets of DisCrit situate race and ability as property, "conferring economic benefits to those who can claim Whiteness or normalcy and disadvantages for those who cannot lay claim to these identity statuses" (Connor et al., 2016, p. 24). The crux of this theory is that a legacy of white supremacy and endemic racism,

paired with perceptions of ability, acts interdependently to marginalize students of color.

The following tenets outline the utility and transformative approach of DisCrit (Connor et al., 2013):

1. DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold normalcy notions.
2. DisCrit values, multidimensional identities, and troubles singular notions of identities such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality.
3. DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.
4. DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within the research.
5. DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny some citizens' rights.
6. DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and Ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as to the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens.
7. DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.
8. The tenets of DisCrit will serve not only as a framework to explore the phenomena but also as an analytical tool and a phenomenological praxis.

Significance of the Study

The disproportionality of students of color is a major concern in special education. While at present disparities by race in special education are less discrepant, there is a wealth of literature that substantiates the claim that students of color (Black/African-American and Hispanic/Latino/Latinx) are overrepresented in special education (Blanchett et al., 2005; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Raines et al., 2016; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Herznik, 2015; Russo, 1997; Skiba et al., 2008). Further, a gap exists in the research that explores how these students exit special education in special education and the forces/factors that may contribute to why this is the case.

New York City's Local Law 27 requires that the Department of Education (NYCDOE) annually submit a comprehensive special education data report to the state. The report revealed alarmingly low declassification rates. The average declassification rate for students in SY 2015-2016 and SY 2017-2018 was 0.82% (Local Law No. 27 2015 and 2017). A deeper dive into the data uncovered racial inequity in declassification. On average, Black and Hispanic/Latino students' declassification rates during these two years were 0.54%. When the average declassification rates of white students, 1.77% (1.7% and 1.83% respectively), are juxtaposed against Black and Hispanic/Latino students (0.54%), the data becomes even more problematic and shows the fundamental and structural equity flaws. If you are a White student, you are more than three times as likely to be declassified from special education as Black and Hispanic/Latino students. The overwhelming presence of disproportionality in declassification rates reflects the endemic nature of racism and the effects of the social constructs of race and ability.

The professional experiences of the researcher also contribute to the significance of the study. Moustakas (1994) states that in a phenomenological investigation, the researcher has a personal interest in whatever they seek to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon. As a special education generalist teaching Mathematics, Social Studies, and English Language Arts, my students have almost exclusively been male students of color. In five years, in self-contained/special class (12:1:1) classrooms where I delivered instruction, 41 out of 48 (85%) of my students had been males of color. Further, and perhaps, more important to this study significance, in six years, only one student was moved across the special education continuum to an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) environment. One student had supplementary aids and services removed (crisis paraprofessional), and there were no students who had been completely declassified. I do not make the previous statements to suggest that these students were eligible for declassification or should have been appropriately placed in a general education setting or serviced in a lesser restrictive environment and were perhaps overlooked or not considered. Instead, I make this statement to stress that disproportionate declassification rates of students of color are a social justice issue. The IEP must be planned to be implemented, executed, monitored, and evaluated to remove services, if applicable.

Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes about race and ability held by members of the CSE and SCSE—specifically, educational administrators, general and special education teachers, and related service providers (school psychologists, speech-

language pathologists, guidance counselors, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists)—influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. The study examined whether a relationship existed between perceptions of race and ability and declassification rates in urban school districts. It also sought to examine the potential for bias in CSE recommendations. Considering the research needs within the field, the following qualitative research questions were developed:

1. What are the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education toward declassification?
2. How, if at all, do the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about race influence declassification?
3. How, if at all, do the perception/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about ability influence declassification?
4. In what ways does the ethnicity of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education influence their perceptions/attitudes about declassification?

Definition of Terms

Autism: According to IDEA (2004), "this term means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are

engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual sensory experience responses".

Black/African-American: Multiple variations exist within the term Black/African-American. For this study's purpose, Black includes those who identify as African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin-x/a/o, or who otherwise have African or Black ancestry.

Committee on Special Education (CSE), Subcommittee on Special Education (SCSE) or Individualized Education Program team (IEP Team): According to IDEA (2004), "the term refers to a group of individuals who are responsible for developing, reviewing, or revising an IEP for a child with a disability."

Deaf-blindness: According to IDEA (2004), it means "concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness."

Deafness: According to IDEA (2004), means "a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification that adversely affects a child's educational performance."

Declassification: is defined as when the team makes a data-based decision that a student is no longer eligible for special education or related services and that their needs can be best met in the general education setting. Thus, a student that exits

special education no longer receives the support of special education and related services.

DisCrit: A theoretical framework developed by Connor et al. (2016) that incorporates facets of Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies into an analysis of ability and race, otherwise known as Dis/ability Critical Race Studies.

Disability: According to IDEA (2004), "a child with a disability means a child evaluated under §§300.304 through 300.311 as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, another health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. Connor et al. (2016) also define disability as the difficulty one exhibits to perform culturally demarcated tasks. The inability to perform these tasks acts as a vehicle to define these individuals as unable to navigate the expectations placed on them by society and perpetuates normalcy."

Dis/ability: Connor et al. (2016) convey the concept of dis/ability as a socially constructed concept that combines ability with disability.

Disproportionality: the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a particular population or demographic group in programs relative to this group's presence in the overall student population.

Emotional disturbance- According to IDEA (2004), means "a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period and to a

marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: (a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors (b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. (c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances. (d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression. (e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems."

Free Appropriate Public Education or FAPE: According to IDEA (2004), the term means "special education and related services that (a) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (b) meet the standards of the State educational agency; (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved; and (d) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program."

Hearing impairment: According to IDEA (2004), it means "an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance, but that is not included under the definition of deafness in this section."

Hispanic/Latino: Multiple variations exist within the term Hispanic/Latino. For this study, the term Latino includes people who identify as Hispanic or Latino/a. In the United States, Latino is a term used to describe Latin American descent, whereas Hispanic refers to people whose culture includes the Spanish language.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Plan: According to IDEA (2004), the term means "a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised under section 614(d). The IEP creates an opportunity for

teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and students (when appropriate) to improve educational results for children with disabilities. The IEP is the cornerstone of quality education for each child with a disability."

Intellectual disability: According to IDEA (2004), it means "significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child's educational performance." The term "intellectual disability" was formerly termed "mental retardation."

Least Restrictive Environment or Setting (LRE): According to IDEA (2004), "to the maximum extent appropriate, students with identified disabilities must be educated alongside students without disabilities in a general education setting. Removing students with disabilities from the general education setting to a more restrictive setting/environment may only occur when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the general education setting/environment, with using supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (IDEA, 2004).

Minority or Students of Color: Multiple variations exist within the term minority or students of color. For this study, the term minority or students of color includes people who identify as African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin-x/a/o, or otherwise having African or Black ancestry Hispanic, Latino/a, LatinX.

Multiple disabilities: According to IDEA (2004), it means "concomitant impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness or intellectual disability-

orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. Multiple disabilities do not include deaf-blindness."

*Orthopedic impairmen*t: According to IDEA, means "a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by a congenital anomaly, impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures)."

Other health impairment: According to IDEA (2004), means "having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness concerning the educational environment, that (i) Is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome; and (ii) Adversely affects a child's educational performance."

Parent: According to IDEA (2004), the term means "(1) a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child (unless a foster parent is prohibited by State law from serving as a parent); (2) a guardian (but not the State if the child is a ward of the State); (3) an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relatives) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare; or (4) a surrogate parent."

Race: The racial categories included in this dissertation generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in the United States and is not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. Also, it is recognized that the categories of the race item include racial and national origin or sociocultural group (United States Census Bureau, 2020). In most urban schools, the race is categorized into the following groups (Black, Hispanic, Asian, and White).

Related Services: According to IDEA (2004), the term means "transportation, and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services (including speech-language pathology and audiology services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation, social work services, counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services, and medical services, except that such medical services shall be for diagnostic and evaluation purposes only) as may be required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes the early identification and assessment of disabling conditions in children."

Secondary School: According to IDEA (2004), the term means "a nonprofit institutional day or residential school that provides secondary education as determined under State law, except that it does not include any education beyond grade 12." For this study, the term refers to grades 7-12.

Special education: According to IDEA (2004), the term means "specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including (1) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in

hospitals, and institutions, and in other settings; and (2) instruction in physical education."

Special education teacher: Teachers who have received certification to deliver special education services from the New York State Education Department.

Specific learning disability: According to IDEA (2004), "a specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, dyscalculia, and developmental aphasia."

Speech or language impairment: According to IDEA (2004), it means "a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance."

Specific Learning Disability: According to IDEA (2004), the term means "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations."

Student/s with disabilities (SWD): According to IDEA (2004), the term means "a child with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this chapter as "emotional disturbance"),

orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services."

Traumatic brain injury: According to IDEA (2004), it means "an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Traumatic brain injury applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. Traumatic brain injury does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma."

Visual impairment, including blindness: According to IDEA (2004), "an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness."

Conclusion

In Chapter One, I presented the structural framework of the study. I provided an overview of the key concepts and the background surrounding the phenomena of declassification. I also stated the purpose and significance of the study as well as its connection to social justice. The research questions were outlined as the crux of the research and the foundation of inquiry to drive the study. I also introduced the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, which will serve as the lens through which I

interpret collected data. I also provided a comprehensive description of my personal and professional connection to the study. This chapter has provided the underpinning from which future chapters will further frame how if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the subcommittee and committee on special education about race and ability influence decision making and declassification of the special education process.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

This chapter will discuss the special education process outlined in IDEA, the conceptual framework, Ladson-Billings' (2007) education debt, and the theoretical framework, Connor et al. (2016) of DisCrit. This chapter will also include a review and synthesis of relevant literature to identify the gaps that the research intends to fill.

Conceptual Framework

As mentioned above, the conceptual framework through which one view a phenomenon enables the person to interpret it. As discussed in Chapter One, Ladson-Billings (2007) redefines the concept of the achievement gap as an education debt that explains the inequalities that exist for students of color. The education debt is the accumulated historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize and manifest throughout our society and negatively impact students of color.

Historical debt is described as the deficit thinking of inferiority perpetuated and applied to people of color based on their race. These historical misassumptions, beginning with slavery, have accumulated (and continue to do so) over time, negatively impacting and influencing every aspect of the lives of people of color. The historical debt produces multigenerational poverty, illiteracy, and mistrust in schools (Ladson- Billings, 2007). Ladson-Billings (2007) describes financial debt as the funding disparities between schools serving white students and those serving students of color. Over time these accumulated funding disparities impact the quality and educational experience of students of color. She describes the sociopolitical debt

as the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic process. Historically, people of color have been disenfranchised, barring them from the decision-making process to ensure that their children receive a quality education. Ladson-Billings describes moral debt as the disparity between what we know is right and what we do.

At the crux of Ladson-Billings (2007) redefining the "achievement gap" as an "education debt" is her argument that the former term unfairly stigmatizes and portrays students of color as defective. Simultaneously, the latter holds our nation accountable for the legacy of structural inequity such as exploitation, racism, and classism that plague the United States and deeply infiltrate its educational system. The term "education debt" provides us with a platform to discuss education as an institution and identify **what is rightfully and legally owed to students of color.**

Theoretical Framework

The researcher will employ Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) as the primary theoretical framework for this study. Its genesis draws from and encompasses Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Disability studies scholars reject the medical/deficit model of disability, which model focuses on the impairment or difference of individuals, characterizes people with dis/abilities as "objects rather than as authors of their own lives," and focuses upon treatments/interventions that attempt to "fix" the person (Buffington-Adams & Vaughn, 2019). Critical Race Theory (a) acknowledges that race is socially constructed, (b) frames the relationship between white people and people of color as one of power, domination, and subjugation, and (c) posits that racism is institutionalized and ingrained in the fabric

of America and influences our judicial, political, and social systems impacting our interactions at the individual, group, and community level (Delgado & Stefancic, 2018)

Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit)

DisCrit denotes a theoretical framework that analyzes the intersectionality of race and ableism's social constructs and can be traced through an academic lineage of boundary-pushing (Connor et al., 2016). Figure 1 summarizes DisCrit and provides a structure for the role of race in examining the disproportionality in the declassification rates of students of color in urban school districts.

According to Connor et al. (2016), DisCrit "is a framework that theorizes about how race, racism, dis/ability, and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education, which affect students of color with dis/abilities qualitatively differently than White students with dis/abilities" (p. 14). Further, the legacy of historical beliefs about race and ability within the context of slavery in the United States forms the underpinnings of DisCrit. Lastly, it focuses on how the intersectionality of race and ableism is rooted in white supremacy and how it is used to marginalize specific society members. As described above, DisCrit combines DS and CRT, positing that race and ability are perceived as property and provide social and economic privileges to students who are "normal" and White while presenting barriers to those who are not.

Figure 1

Dis/ability Critical Race Studies in Education Theoretical Framework

This figure illustrates the tenets of DisCRit as outlined by Connor and colleagues (2016).

DisCrit includes seven tenets, which I summarize below:

Race and Ableism Used in Tandem to Marginalize and Shape Normalcy

DisCrit theorizes that race and ableism are parallel, reciprocal, and cyclical systems of oppression that work covertly and interdependently to marginalize and shape normalcy. The concept of being "able" and white in the United States is not only seen as normal but also as property, privilege, and as a commodity. Hehir (2015) defines ableism as "the devaluation of disability" that "results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that disability inherently means deficiency" (p. 3). He further describes the origins of ableism as rooted in discrimination, oppression, and marginalization, stating that

> ableism is a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional, and physical

> disabilities…..deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities…fall out of scope of what is currently designed as socially acceptable." (Hehir, 2015, p. 3).

Watt and Norton (2013) deconstruct the definition of race, stating that it "originated about assumed differences on biological grounds, with members of a particular racial group sharing certain distinguishing physical characteristics such as bone structure and skin colour" (Watt & Norton, 2013). However, they state that race has evolved into a social and political construct that carries a burden of historical and prejudicial connotations (Watt & Norton, 2013). Race and ableism work in tandem as historically the rule have been and continues to be that different (a deviation from white and able) is deficient.

Multidimensional Identities Exist

DisCrit stresses multidimensional identities rather than the singular notions of identity, such as race, dis/ability, social class, or gender that dominate our society (Connor et al., 2016). DisCrit acknowledges, challenges, and interrogates these notions by acknowledging how the complexities of these multidimensional identities intersect. For example, an individual's identity may include several markers such as language, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexuality, and religion. DisCrit challenges why these multidimensional identities are viewed as different and substandard - departures from normative culture. Lastly, DisCrit posits that views of

multidimensional identities contribute to constructing disability as a socially created concept.

Race and Dis/ability as Social Constructs

DisCrit emphasizes that race and dis/ability are exclusionary social constructs rooted in normalcy, not biology. Further, it acknowledges that these social constructs negatively impact students of color. Reid and Night (2007) hypothesize that we live in a society where it is better to be as normal as possible rather than to be disabled. They further indicate that the overrepresentation of minorities in special education is a problem and suggest that the historical construction of difference makes institutionalized racism, classism, and sexism seem natural in their conflation with a disability, defined as oppression based on ableism (Reid & Knight, 2007). The crux of their work suggests that labeling minority students as Learning Disabled (LD) adversely affects their opportunity to obtain a college education.

Chesmore, Ou, and Reynolds (2016) conducted a longitudinal study investigating the relationship between childhood placement in special education and adult well-being among 1,377 low-income, minority children. An ongoing and comprehensive investigation of the effects of Chicago's Child-Parent Center (CPC) Program revealed that after accounting for sociodemographic factors and early academic achievement, children receiving special education services tended to have lower rates of high school completion and fewer years of education, as well as greater rates of incarceration, substance misuse, and depression (Chesmore et al., 2016).

The real-life impact of social constructs is evident in Carlson and Parshall's (1996) preliminary investigation of declassification for special education. The

researchers analyzed data collected by the Michigan Department of Education. The results suggested that the longer the declassified students were in special education, the lower the respondents rated their overall academic performance. Those in special education for one year, as a group, had a grade point average of 2.8 on a 4.0 scale. Those in special education for more than seven years, as a group, had a grade point average of 2.1 (Carlson & Parshall, 1996).

Privileges Marginalized Voices

DisCrit seeks to disrupt the tradition of ignoring traditionally marginalized groups' voices and instead privileges insider voices (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit does not purport to "give voice." It acknowledges that people of color and those with disabilities indeed have a voice, although historically, it has been silenced. Further, DisCrit charges researchers, educators, and social justice advocates with facilitating a platform that enables discourse about the lived experiences of students of color and those with disabilities who are impacted by inequity. While this study does not specifically include student voice, which is critical to DisCrit, it does, however, acknowledge that stakeholders of historically marginalized groups are "insiders" and have perspectives and insights that can inform legal research and education reform and serve as counter-narratives to the status quo and academic activism.

Race and Ability as Property

DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property conferring economic benefits to those who can claim whiteness or normalcy and disadvantages those who cannot lay claim to these identity statuses (Annamma et al., 2013). Donnor (2013) states that "one of the greatest assets of whiteness as property was the ability to

exclude others from the benefits of whiteness, maintaining the inequitable distribution of resources" (p. 199-200). Additionally, Annamma develops Donnor's stance by stating, "whiteness as property has historically and continues to function as a tool to confer social benefits, from the intangible to the material, on those who possess it and to punish those who do not" (Annamma, 2015, p. 6). Blanchett further states

> "the truth of the matter is, as McIntosh (1990) says, that "Whites are carefully taught not to recognize White privilege" (p. 1); and they often do not see themselves as racist because they may also have been, as McIntosh says she was,"taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of a group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on [Whites] from birth." (Blanchett, 2006, p. 25).

Race and ability as property manifest themselves in the field of education, as evidenced by the enduring battle to ensure what is owed to all students of color, quality, and equitable education.

Activism and Resistance

DisCrit supports activism and promotes diverse forms of resistance against domination (Annamma et al., 2016). While it supports the need to disrupt notions of normalcy, it also recognizes that some of the activities traditionally thought of as activism (marches, sit-ins, and other forms of civil disobedience) may be based on ableist norms, which may not be accessible to those with perceived difference resistance (Annamma et al., 2016). DisCrit supports diverse expressions of activism and resistance.

Conclusion

Through the lens of the DisCrit theoretical framework, this qualitative research study examines the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. Its seven tenets and inherent recognition of the implications of the intersections of race and ability on students of color will also inform the analysis and its synthesis of relevant literature.

Review of Related Literature

To effectively explore declassification, a comprehensive review of legislative requirements for initial eligibility into receiving special education services is essential. The below sections outline the mandated federal legislation, special education processes, and procedural safeguards.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

IDEA is a federal law that requires schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities by providing them with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) at no cost to parents/guardians. According to Part B of IDEA regulations, there are six key purposes:

> (1) to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living; (2) to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected; (3) to assist States, localities, educational

> service agencies, and Federal agencies in providing for the education of all children with disabilities; (4) to assist States in the implementation of a statewide, comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary, interagency system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families; (5) to ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities by supporting system improvement activities; coordinated research and personnel preparation; coordinated technical assistance, dissemination, and support; and technology development and media services; (6) to assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

The inception of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) (1975) and subsequent authorizations as IDEA (2004) have been instrumental in securing the rights of students with disabilities across the country as families' procedural rights, safeguards, and all associated special education processes are governed by federal regulations.

The Special Education Process

Special education is a necessary component of public education that provides students with disabilities an education that helps them achieve meaningful outcomes while simultaneously experiencing learning as valued members of general programs and classes (Obiakor et al., 2010). For a student to qualify to receive special

education services, school districts must follow specific processes outlined by IDEA. Figure 2 encapsulates an overview of the special education process.

Differentiating between the Sub and Committees of Special Education

The committee of special education (CSE) is composed of a team of qualified professionals who coordinate and conduct the special education process for students. While IDEA references the CSE as an IEP team, the term CSE will describe the IEP team for this study. The full CSE includes the identified student (required if they are 15 years or older) and parents/guardians with knowledge of the child's academic, social-emotional, and physical needs and strengths. This district representative serves as the chair to facilitate discourse and is knowledgeable about special education services. Other members include a school psychologist who explains the evaluation results and special and general education teachers who help with support, services, curriculum modification, and goal setting. Parents are also allowed to invite advocates to support them in understanding information. The attendance of the members mentioned above is required for initial or mandated three-year reevaluation meetings.

Annual reviews are not as comprehensive as initial meetings or mandated three-year reevaluations and are primarily used to review progress and make minor changes to a student's IEP. The attendance requirements are less strict and only call for a subcommittee on special education (SCSE). The attendance requirements of members of the CSE and SCSE are outlined in Table 1. The SCSE includes the parent, general and special education teachers, and student, if appropriate. An SCSE does not have as much authority as a CSE. This is because the SCSE may not

recommend a full-time special education class for the first time or recommend a more restrictive placement. If a parent believes that a more intensive program is required for their child, they can request or arrange for a comprehensive and thorough reevaluation, submit the new information to the CSE, and request a full CSE meeting.

Figure 2

The Special Education Process

This figure illustrates an overview of the special education process (Bility, 2021).

Identification

According to IDEA, under the Child Find mandate, school districts must identify, locate, and evaluate all children from birth through age 21 in public, private, or homeschool who may need special education or related services (IDEA, 2004). These students must be suspected of having one or more of the 13 classified disabilities under IDEA that adversely impact their learning. These classified disabilities are as follows: (a) autism, (b) deafness, (c) deaf-blindness, (d) emotional disturbance, (e) hearing impairment, (f) intellectual disability, (g) learning disability, (h) multiple disabilities, (i) orthopedic impairment, (j) other health impairment, (k)

speech or language impairment, (l) traumatic brain injury, (m) visual impairment (IDEA, 2004).

Referral and Consent

Once students are identified, they are referred by school personnel/designees, parents/guardians, or state educational agencies to request an initial evaluation to determine whether they have a disability and need special education or related services. After the school district receives the referral and request, the school psychologist then sends a "Notice of Referral Letter" that explains parental procedural rights and safeguards, elicits parental consent for an initial evaluation in their preferred home language, and requests a meeting with the parent with a school social worker for a social history interview. (IDEA, 2004).

Table 1

CSE and SCSE Members' Attendance during the Special Education Process (Guide to the Individualized Education Program, 2019)

	Initial IEP Meeting (CSE)	Annual/Requested Review (SCSE)	Reevaluation Requested or Three-Year (CSE)
Parent Student	Must be invited Can attend when appropriate. Required in 15 years or older	Must be invited Can attend when appropriate. Required in 15 years or older	Must be invited Can attend when appropriate. Required in 15 years or older
District Representative	Required to attend	Required to attend	Required to attend
School Psychologist	Required to attend	Can attend when needed	Required to attend
Special Education Teacher	Required to attend unless the student is being considered for	Required to attend unless the student is currently	Required to attend unless the student is receiving related services only

	related services only	receiving related services only	
Related Service Provider	Required to attend when the student is being considered for related services only	Required to attend when the student is being recommended for related services only	Required to attend when the student is being recommended for related services only
General Education Teacher	Required to attend if the student is or may participate in the general education setting	Required to attend if the student is or may participate in the general education setting	Required to attend if the student is or may participate in the general education setting
School Social Worker	Should attend whenever possible	Should attend whenever possible	Required to attend if he/she was involved in the evaluation process, especially if they conducted the psychosocial evaluation
Parent Member	Required to attend if requested in writing by the parent with at least 72 hours' notice	Required to attend if requested in writing by the parent with at least 72 hours' notice	Required to attend if requested in writing by the parent with at least 72 hours' notice
School Physician	Required to attend if requested in writing by the parent with at least 72 hours' notice	Required to attend if requested in writing by the parent with at least 72 hours' notice	Required to attend if requested in writing by the parent with at least 72 hours' notice

Evaluation and Eligibility

The CSE uses various comprehensive assessment tools to evaluate the student,

which includes but are not limited to (a) cognitive testing, (b) observation reports of the student in a learning environment, (c) student interviews, (d) parent/guardian interviews, (e) achievement data, (f) social-emotional development reports, (g) medical history, (h) home visits, (i) psychoeducational evaluations, (j) speech/language assessments, (k) physical and occupational therapy evaluation, (l) assistive technology evaluation, (m) hearing or vision testing, (n) vocational assessments (n) social history reports and (o) functional behavioral assessment. Parents also have the right to pay for independent assessments (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Additionally, under IDEA, a parent or guardian may request an evaluation at any time. The school must hold an evaluation if it appears that the child may have a disability. The evaluation is used to determine if a student has a disability and what services and support are needed. After the evaluation, the school will hold an eligibility meeting to decide if a child qualifies for special education. If the answer is yes, families work with a school team to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a legal document that spells out a child's educational goals and the services and supports the school will provide.

IEP Development

After the initial evaluation, the CSE meets to discuss and analyze the assessment results to determine whether the student is eligible/ineligible to receive special education services in the least restrictive environment and decide if they recommend a special education placement/recommendation. If the student is found eligible, an individualized education program (IEP) meeting is scheduled, and the CSE develops an IEP. The IEP outlines (a) the student's present level of performance

(evaluation results, academic achievement, functional results, and social and physical development), (b) measurable annual goals that the student is expected to achieve in one year, (c) progress monitoring timelines, (d) recommended special education programs/services as well as the location of these services and modifications, (e) testing accommodations, (f) transition activities/goals, (g) a statement that indicates whether the student will participate in state and district-wide assessments or not, (h) the extent to which the student will participate in the general education environment with students without disabilities, (i) whether the child needs special transportation to and from school (IDEA, 2004).

Placement and Services

According to IDEA (2004), in determining the educational placement of a child with a disability, the CSE must ensure that the decision is made by a group of persons, including the parents and other persons knowledgeable about the child and its meaning the evaluation data. The placement options are made in conformity with the LRE provisions. The federal government mandates that the student's placement be determined at least annually, based on the student's IEP. The placement is as close as possible to the student's home. Further, school districts must ensure that a continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services (IDEA, 2004).

Students may receive instruction in (a) regular classes, (b) special classes, (c) special schools, (d) home instruction, and (e) instruction in hospitals and institutions. A student may also receive resource room or receive related services in the form of (a) audiology, (b) counseling services, (c) early identification and assessment of

disabilities, (d) interpreting services, (e) medical services, (f) occupational therapy, (g) orientation and mobility services, (h) parent counseling and training, (i) physical therapy, (j) psychological services, (k) recreation, (l) rehabilitation counseling services, (m) school health services, (n) social work services, (o) speech-language pathology, or (p) transportation. (IDEA, 2004).

IDEA (2004) also outlines placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE) by stating,

> to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily " (Sec. 300.114 (a)(2)(i)

As evidenced above, IDEA (2004) mandates that students are educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the LRE. In some cases, the LRE is not the general education setting; however, because it may not be appropriate for a particular student, however, in theory, this mandate promotes the exclusion of SWD's from participating in the general education setting.

Progress Monitoring, Reevaluation, Annual, and Three-Year Review

A critical component to the special education process is that an IEP must be reviewed annually and that re-evaluation must occur every three years, where

appropriate. During annual reviews, the SCSE meets to discuss the students' progress, possible modifications to the IEP, or declassification. A students' IEP must be reevaluated every three years to determine whether the student still has a disability and whether the student will continue to benefit from special education services. Additionally, as it relates to progress monitoring, the CSE is mandated to stipulate when periodic reports on student progress will be provided to students. This is critical to the special education process because it keeps families informed on whether their child is slated or on track to achieve outlined measurable annual goals.

Declassification

The declassification of students from receiving special education services requires that the CSE collects and utilizes evidence/data to change students' eligibility status from eligible to ineligible. As described throughout this study, declassification should be an option for students with disabilities; however, it is not explicitly specified in special education legislation and is a rare occurrence.

Racial Disparities in Special Education

Disproportionate representation plagues special education: it can be best described as when more minority children are served in special programs than expected from the proportion of minority students in the general school population that continues until the present time (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Cooc & Kiru, 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020), in the school year 2018–19, the percentage (out of total public school enrollment) of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under IDEA differed race/ethnicity. The percentage of students served under IDEA was highest for American

Indian/Alaska Native students (18 percent), followed by Black students (16 percent), White students and students of two or more races (14 percent each), Hispanic students (13 percent), Pacific Islander students (11 percent), and Asian students (7 percent).

These statistics may not seem alarming; however, this reveals that students of color are identified to receive special education services at disproportionate rates (Skiba et al., 2008). For example, African American students account for 33% of students identified as having an intellectual disability, clearly discrepant from their 17% representation in the school-age population (Skiba & et al., 2008). Additionally, there is an over-representation of particular minority groups in high incidence special education classifications such as intellectual disability, learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services under the U.S. Department of Education published a report that described the nation's progress in

> (a) providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for children with disabilities under IDEA, Part B and early intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families under IDEA, Part C, (b) ensuring that the rights of these children with disabilities and their parents are protected, (c) assisting states and localities in providing for the education of all children with disabilities, and (d) assessing the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities (38th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2016)

This report revealed that while IDEA outlines eligibility and evaluation guidelines, national data on the representation of various ethnic groups in special education

surfaces controversial over-identification in certain categories. In 2014, the most prevalent disability category of students ages six through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, was specific learning disabilities (39.2 percent). The next most common disability category was speech or language impairments (17.6 percent), followed by other health impairments (14.4 percent), autism (8.6 percent), intellectual disabilities (7.0 percent), and emotional disturbance (5.9 percent). Students ages 6 through 21 in "Other disabilities combined" accounted for the remaining 7.3 percent of students ages six through 21 served under IDEA, Part B.

Black or African American students ages six through 21 were 2.08 and 2.22 times more likely to be served under IDEA, Part B, for emotional disturbance and intellectual disabilities, respectively, than were students ages six through 21 in all other racial/ethnic groups combined. Hispanic or Latinx students ages six through 21 were 1.04, 1.35, 1.21, 1.31, and 1.08 times more likely to be served under IDEA, Part B, for deaf-blindness, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, specific learning disabilities, and speech and language impairments, respectively, than were students ages six through 21 in all other racial/ethnic groups combined. White students ages 6 through 21 were 1.16, 1.1, 1.11, 1.28, and 1.29 times more likely to be served under IDEA, Part B, for autism, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities, other health impairments, and traumatic brain injury, respectively, than were students ages six through 21 in all other racial/ethnic groups combined (38th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2016).

The purpose of a literature review is to sufficiently position the study within the realm of existing publications as it relates specifically to the topic while also foreshadowing the determined research approach (Creswell, 2007). The initial search based on terms from the research questions (e.g., exiting special education, declassification rates of students of color, students of color, and movement to least restrictive settings) yielded few studies. As a result, I was not successful in my search of the literature to support the earlier research questions. There appears to be a gap in the research that specifically examines the perceptions/attitudes of CSE and SCSE members perceptions/attitudes regarding declassification. The existence of this gap in the research literature does not mean that perceptions of declassification do not exist but simply that its extent and its causes remain relatively uncharted.

I collected a set of articles, however, that explored (a) the role of the school psychologist in the special education process as they are often referred to as the "gatekeepers" of special education, (b) the disproportionate representation of minorities in special education, (c) experiences with the special education process and, (d) specific types of students that are less likely to be declassified from receiving special education services. Further, and perhaps, more important, these themes and findings are aligned to the DisCrit Framework. The following text presents a review of the literature.

The School Psychologist as the Gate Keeper of Special Education

The school psychologist's position is important to investigate because they have a critical role in and contribute incalculably to special education and its associated processes. They are often referred to as the "gatekeepers" of special

education because they are the most influential CSE members using psychoeducational evaluations and assessments to determine eligibility under IDEA. School psychologists are CSE members and educational stakeholders who support students' capacity to learn and contribute to teachers' ability to teach. Their expertise features a combination of competence in mental health, learning theories (behaviorism and cognitivism), behavior, and evidenced-based assessment and evaluation. Their ultimate purpose is to evaluate, recommend or provide services that may improve academic performance and provide psychological counseling to individuals, groups, and families, and coordinate intervention strategies to manage individuals and school-wide crises (Verma, 2013).

Although school psychology is a specialized branch of psychology, it was not established as an important field of interest until the clinical studies of Lightner Witmer, who is regarded as the founder of school psychology (D' Aato, 2011). Witmer's interests were sparked early in his professional career as an English and History teacher. He was intrigued by students' varying learning needs and how some had deeper understandings of concepts than others. In the late 19th and early 20th century, as public education became compulsory, partly due to the concentration of immigration in urban centers and the industrial movement, a consensus emerged that placed improving the conditions of children's lives at the forefront of the federal government's plan. Federal Child labor laws were enacted, education became compulsory, and children's educational rights were secured. As education became compulsory, special education services were required for some students, and a demand for experts to select, evaluate, assess, and place these students became

necessary. This surfaced as the school psychologist, an applied psychologist at this time, as the "gatekeeper" of special education. When Congress enacted the landmark legislation *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (Public Law 94-142) in 1975 to support states and localities in protecting the rights, meeting the individual needs, and improving the results of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families and provide them with FAPE, the profession of school psychologist saw growth with regards to increased programs, national associations, and literature (Rhodes et al., 2007).

Currently, while many school psychology graduate programs seem to be comprehensive and seek to train (through content and experiences in graduate school) and prepare effective practitioners, Newel and colleagues (2010) suggest that school psychologists' multicultural competence development has become a major challenge. They argue that multicultural competence requires "an individual going beyond the mere possession of multicultural sensitivity also to attain an acceptable level of knowledge, a sufficient shift in attitude, and the production of a repertoire of behaviors consistent with successfully interacting with diverse populations in multicultural settings" (p. 250). Further, they contend that this shift is critical, as the U.S. population is shifting and expanding in ways that create a wider range of cultural and linguistic differences.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), there is a shortage of culturally and linguistically diverse school psychologists (National Association of School Psychologists, 2017). Culturally diverse school psychologists are underrepresented within the school psychology workforce: About 87% are White,

and only 6% are Hispanic (Walcott et al., 2016), which differs sharply from the student population (McFarland et al., 2017). Further, bilingual school psychologists are in short supply within school psychology: 86% of school psychologists are fluent in English only, and among those who are fluent in a second language, less than 8% provide services in that language (Walcott et al., 2016).

A study used narrative analysis and autoethnography to document how practicing school psychologists described culturally competent professional identities and practices and shed light on the dichotomy between training and multicultural competency (Johnson, 2013). Johnson suggested that school psychologists promote fairness and employ a social justice framework to deliver services and educational programs. Like Newel et al., Johnson contends that school psychologists' training is a lifelong learning process that requires continued professional development, content, and rich experiences during graduate school. He suggests that school psychologists "function as change agents" (p. 97) by using their communication, collaboration, and consultation skills to promote necessary change at the individual student, classroom, building, district, state, and federal levels.

Disproportionate Representation and Placement of Minorities in Special Education

Disproportionality exists when students' representation in special education programs or individual special education eligibility labels exceeds their proportional enrollment in the overall student population (Blanchett, 2006). In their 2006 article, Harry and Anderson elaborate on the definition of disproportionality, defining it as plus or minus 10% of the percentage expected based on the school-age population.

Disproportionality is about relative placement, not absolute numbers (Harry & Anderson, 2006).

"Overrepresentation" is synonymous in the literature to describe this same phenomenon. Some argue that overrepresentation is not a problem because the extra support provided in special education or related services is beneficial. Waitoller and colleagues (2010) stated that the problematic nature of overrepresentation manifests itself in labeling (deficit thinking, low expectations, and poor educational and life outcomes), segregation of placement (being denied access to the general education curriculum and the least restrictive environment, receiving services that do not meet their individual educational needs) and presumed ineffectiveness of special education, all of which are detrimental to students. However, it is critical to understand that overrepresentation must not be treated as problematic in all circumstances. It constitutes a problem (a) if students are mistakenly placed in special education when other programs may have been more beneficial for them, (b) if children are identified as disabled because of poor-quality instruction in the general education classroom, and (c) if the quality of instruction in special education classrooms deters students' educational progress, keeping them from returning to the general education classroom (Waitoller et al., 2010)

The literature on disproportionality in special education is extensive and has been among the key educational equity issues in the field for nearly 50 years (Skiba et al., 2008). It also has roots in a long history of educational segregation and discrimination: "Disproportionality was first identified by Lloyd Dunn in 1968, and the patterns and proportions have been fairly robust ever since" (Cohen et al., 2015, p.

X). In 1968, "Blacks were overrepresented in [educable mentally retarded classes] classes by a factor of 330 percent… [and] overrepresentation increased to 540 percent by 1974" (Herznik, 2015, p. 952). There have been reductions in disproportionality since the mid-20th century; however, federal data from 2018-2019, which includes children 3 to 21 years old served under IDEA, shows that African American and Hispanic students still account for more than 43% of received services (National Center for Education Statistics 2019).

Disproportionality becomes more palpable when special education statistics are disaggregated by race and disability category. Using risk ratio, Parrish (2002) calculated that Black students are 2.88 times more likely than White students to be labeled mentally retarded and 1.92 times more likely than White students to be categorized as emotionally disturbed. Hosp and Reschly (2004) examined referral and identification rates for racial differences. Compared to White students, they found that African American students were 1.32 times more likely to be referred for evaluation and 1.18 times more likely to be found eligible for special education (Maydosz, 2014). These statistics indicate that over almost fifty years, the landscape of overrepresentation of minorities in special education, although not as severe, has continued. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), however, there have been changes, and racial disproportionality is at 2% when comparing Black students to the total amount of students in the United States.

Minority students continue to be identified, recommended, evaluated, and often mis/diagnosed at significantly higher rates than their Caucasian counterparts as it pertains to receiving special education services. Some believe that this phenomenon

is not a coincidence as "the overrepresentation of minorities in special education in elementary and high school and their underrepresentation at the postsecondary level demonstrate clearly how the historical legacies of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism continue to influence educational practice" (Reid & Knight, 2007, p. 21). Researchers suggest that socioeconomic factors, experiences with racism, deficit thinking, school and community demographics, the referral and assessment process, quality of instruction, and the subjective nature of the definition of special education may contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (McKenna, 2013).

Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, and Roberts (2014) conducted a study to investigate minority representation in special education given the mandate and related efforts to reduce overrepresentation and identify trends for the five years from 2004 to 2008. They used growth models to analyze national data trends from the 50 states and the District of Columbia during those five years. The findings from the study showed (a) that African American students were the most represented group in special education (c) that there were encouraging changes in the decrease of African American students in intellectual disability categories, but (c) suggested however that minority overrepresentation has not changed significantly and continues to present a challenge (Zhang et al. 2014).

The overrepresentation of minority students in special education is not unique to the United States (Sweller et al., 2012). It has proven to exist on a global scale, as suggested in a study that analyzed 13 years of enrolment data from the state of New South Wales, Australia. Although the student populations and education systems

differ internationally, similarities exist in terms of disproportionate representation in separate special education settings. Students identified in the main "minority" group or language background other than English (LBOTE) are underrepresented in all separate special education settings serving students with a disability. In contrast, indigenous students (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) are significantly overrepresented. Indigenous students are being enrolled in separate settings faster than students in any other group. The findings revealed differences in enrollment patterns between Indigenous students, students from an LBOTE, and non-Indigenous English-speaking students. This study's findings resonate with research on the disproportionate overrepresentation of minority groups from the United States, strongly indicating that disproportionality is not a problem unique to North America.

Other Participants in the Special Education Process

The special education process is intended to be collaborative. Additionally, it is critical to recognize that parents are integral to the decision-making and implementation of special education and related services for students with disabilities. Blue-Banning and colleagues (2004) conducted a quantitative study in which they facilitated 33 focus groups with adult family members of children with and without disabilities and service providers and administrators. An additional 32 interviews were conducted with non-English speaking parents and their service providers. The study found that communication, commitment, trust, and respect, among other qualities, as being important in successful collaborative partnerships. Further, this collaboration should not be a matter of compliance with IDEA but instead of genuine and authentic best practices.

Zagona, Miller, Kurth, and Love (2018) outlined that parents are integral to the processes and decisions in planning and implementing special education and related services for students with disabilities, as there is a need for high-quality communication and an equal partnership. Zagona et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study that utilized focus groups to examine 18 parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities' perspectives on special education experiences. Parents expressed a desire to be involved in decisions, and they described a desire to obtain inclusive education placements for their children.

The special education process is also intended to be unbiased, but it is often difficult to exclude other factors' influence. Knoteck (2003) conducted an ethnographic study that examined two multidisciplinary teams in a rural Carolina Piedmont community, how special education eligibility decisions were made, and the appropriateness of those decisions. The researcher posited that the student characteristics associated with referral and placement bias include gender, social class, and ethnicity. Knoteck stated that none of these characteristics should be the subject of bias; the role of ethnicity in students' referral and placement has been the subject of especially intense debate and special concern. Knotek found that when students either were from low socioeconomic status or presented with behavior problems, the evaluation team's problem-solving process became more subjective. The researcher found that multidisciplinary teams focused more on the students' profiles (i.e., low socioeconomic status and problem behaviors) than on the original referral reason, setting the locus of the student's problem rather than on the school and its educational practices. He further found that students' characterizations and their

problems were affected by the teachers' initial focus of concern, the students' SES, the interplay of social status among the team members, and interventions based upon false representations of the student's functioning. Decisions were not entirely unbiased; instead, because of the effects of the social milieu, there was a complicated interweaving of the objective and the subjective and a resultant skew in the discussions about students who were identified as having behavior problems or coming from a low-SES family. Knotek finally concluded that this tendency might contribute to the overrepresentation of African-American students in special education referrals and placement. He noted that, compared to their White peers, African-American students are overrepresented in low-SES categories and behavioral referrals.

In a two-year ethnographic study, Rogers (2002) used critical discourse analysis to examine two special education eligibility meetings for a female-identified adolescent regarding speech-language impairment services and multiple disabilities. The findings indicated a clear contrast between the two meetings. The first meeting lasted almost an hour, and the participants utilized formal evidence to document the student's deficits. Also, in this meeting, the student's mother had few opportunities to speak during the discussion. A decision was made to place the student in a self-contained special education classroom. A year after the student was placed in special education, the Individualized Education Program team met to reevaluate its placement. Unlike the first meeting, the reevaluation meeting focused on the students' academic and behavioral progress and strengths. However, no formal evidence was presented to support this progress. The second meeting was more informal, and the

students' mother participated more than in the first meeting. At the end of the meeting, the student and her mother decided to continue the special education placement. Rogers concluded that the team's institutional, discursive practices affected the student's and her mother's decision to stay in special education.

As stated above, the special education process has a history of racial bias. Bahr and Fuchs (1991) conducted a study to explore whether classroom teachers' perceptions of difficult-to-teach (DTT) children were racially biased. The study participants included 40 classroom teachers, and each of them nominated a DTT student that was most likely to be referred for a psychological evaluation and placed in special education. The population of the students that were nominated was 50% Black and 50% white. The researchers employed a multimethod, multisource approach. They found that a significantly larger number of black students were rated more appropriate for a special education referral by black and white general education teachers.

While the special education process is intended to be unbiased, parents of students with disabilities also hold perceptions about special education that the literature tends to ignore. Williams (2007) conducted a qualitative study that explored the perceptions of one group of African-American parents in North Carolina that challenged their school system on the placement and quality of services delivered to African-American children in special education. Out of the study, which employed semi-structured individual and group interviews, four following themes emerged: the legitimacy of special education, cultural disconnect, misuse and abuse of protocol, and life chances of the identified student. Participants agreed that special education

was needed for all types of students; however, the overrepresentation of African-American males in special education in North Carolina schools is an issue. They communicated that there are African-American students in special education who are misplaced and that special education was used for removing challenging, less desirable students from mainstream classrooms. The special education process was made up of poor identification practices that made exiting special education and returning to general education nearly impossible. As a result, participants questioned the legitimacy of special education and considered their county's current practice antithetical to their children's education. Participants further believed that many African-American students were unfairly relegated to special education classes and categories because teachers do not understand the students' culture (Williams, 2007). While IDEA secured the rights and set forth procedural safeguards, part of special education's "illegitimacy" came from what they perceived as manipulative practices that did not support the intent of special education law. Lastly, participants were concerned about the life chances of identified students with disabilities. They believed that these students would experience a diminished quality of life after high school.

Ruppar and Gaffney (2011) conducted a study which explored (a) how communication at an IEP meeting might influence the decisions that are made during the meeting, and (b) team members' perspectives on the decision-making process and the decisions that were made at the meeting (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). The researchers analyzed the transcript of an initial evaluation and IEP meeting and subsequent interviews with CSE and SCSE members to understand the decision-

making process and outcomes for a 5-year old boy. Out of the study emerged three themes, two of which are critical to this research. First, CSE and SCSE members had opinions that differed from the meeting's decisions, but they did not express them during the meeting. Second, communication before the meeting affected the decisions, and likewise, communication that did not occur caused an uncomfortable situation during the meeting (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011).

Declassification

Declassification is the removal of a students' special education services on the premise that a student no longer requires services (aids, support, or setting) and that they can be successful in a general education setting. In a case study of five secondary-aged youth who were declassified from Special Education, a team of researchers found that many students were responsible for initiating declassification on their behalf. In contrast, others did not feel that they ever had a disability at all or that they should have ever received special education services (Carlson & Reavey, 2000). Research also suggests that "the most movement out of special education occurred in the earlier grades. Specifically, 80% of the students in special education from kindergarten had been declassified from special education by the end of first grade. In contrast, only 0% and 2% exited special education from first to second grade and second to third grade respectively" (Flynn, 2013). The research invites us to question why and what contributes to declassification rates decreasing by nearly 80%.

Shinde and Yukiko (2017), using the first four years of the pre-elementary education longitudinal study data set, investigated national trends in classification

changes among young children with disabilities, the relationship between classification changes and children's demographic information, and the relationship of classification changes and children's performance outcomes over time. The findings suggested that de/reclassification differed according to race, and the pattern of the prevalence was not consistent across cohort groups. For three-year-old and four-year-old cohorts, African-American children tended to stay in the program for all years and experience lower prevalence rates of declassification. In contrast, higher percentages of African-American children in the three-year-old cohort were reclassified than those in the four-year-old cohort (Shinde & Yukiko, 2017).

In a study of a TK-12 (transitional kindergarten-12th grade) large urban school district in the County of Los Angeles, Garcia (2007) analyzed a data set that included all students eligible for special education services and found that English language level, disability, and ethnicity are significant predictors for special education exit. Furthermore, students in elementary grades, English-speaking students, students identified with non-subjective disabilities (identified by medical personnel or specialists such as physical disabilities, blindness, or hearing impairments), and White and Asian students are significantly more likely to exit from special education. Garcia (2007) also found disproportionality in African American students that exit compared to other ethnic groups. Lastly, the researcher found that "when controlling for Disability Class and SES, Caucasian students who exit special education appear to exit sooner than African American and Latino students who exit" (Garcia, 2007, p. 82).

In a qualitative study, Carlson and Reavey (2000) investigated the conditions

that support declassification from special education as a relatively rare event. The researchers used semi-structured interviews with five students declassified in high school, as well as their family members. The results suggested that some students felt that they were declassified because they did not believe that they ever had disabilities and saw declassification as a process for correcting an initial error in eligibility (Carlson & Reavey, 2000). Some students were responsible for initiating declassification on their behalf. Additionally, schools supported and promoted declassification by incrementally reducing the frequency and intensity of special education support. Declassification occurred more frequently when students transitioned from one educational setting to another (elementary school to high school or high school to graduation).

Conclusion

The research review demonstrates a wealth of literature that substantiates the claim that students of color have been disproportionately overrepresented in special education but underrepresented in declassification. This research will address the aforementioned gaps to understand why the overall declassification rate is low and if decisions during the special education process are related to CSE members' perceptions of race and ability.

CHAPTER 3

Methods and Procedures

In Chapter 1, I discussed the purpose of the study, to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. Chapter 2 discussed the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, reviewed and synthesized relevant literature, and identified the gaps that the study intends to fill. Chapter 3 presents the study's research design, methods, and methodology. It discusses the methods for data collection and the corresponding data analysis techniques. It also features a description of the study's participants, setting, the research procedures, and steps for ethical assurances. The data collection and analysis identified in this chapter provides the foundation for the findings presented in Chapter 4 and the discussion and conclusions detailed in chapter 5 of this study.

Research Questions

Considering the research needs within the field, the following specific research questions were developed to investigate the phenomena and to serve as the cornerstone for the analysis of collected data (Anfara et al., 2002):

1. What are the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education toward declassification?
2. How, if at all, do the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about race influence declassification?

3. How, if at all, do the perception/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about ability influence declassification?
4. In what ways does the ethnicity of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education influence their perceptions/attitudes about declassification?

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design and approach to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. The researcher was deliberate in selecting a qualitative research methodology because, at its core, it is an attempt to deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life, which align with the research interests (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). The researcher selected phenomenology as a research method for this study because it interprets human interaction and seeks to open a window into things that allow researchers to explore phenomena that humans experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenologists attempt to enter their informants' conceptual world to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives (Creswell, 2007). They explore the truth by studying shared experiences through lived experiences. Phenomenology was appropriate for this research study because its tenets indicate that participants' interpretation of their reality is rooted in perception: it is regarded as the primary source of knowledge. Most importantly, in phenomenology, to seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is not

presumed true but is defined as access to the truth (Merleau-Ponty, 2017, p. xviii). A research participant's perception is critical to exploring an identified phenomenon because their reality allows the researcher to construct truth.

Phenomenology was appropriate for this qualitative phenomenological research study because of its systematic design for data analysis and creating textural and structural descriptions. This approach enabled the researcher to develop a deep understanding of the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. The phenomenological process began with (1) identifying the phenomenon, the declassification rates of students of color in urban school districts, (2) bracketing the researcher's personal experiences regarding the phenomena (epoche), (3) coding and analyzing the data into themes, (4) horizontalization, textural analysis (a description of what the participants experienced) and description analysis (how the participants experienced the phenomenon and ended with (5) providing a composite conclusion of the collected data (Creswell, 2017).

Setting and Demographics

This qualitative study was conducted in an urban school district in the Northeast region of the United States. Due to COVID-19, data collection took place virtually on Zoom at the participants' discretion during the non-instructional time or after school. The setting was important to this study because the researcher sought to understand CSE members' lived experiences in an urban school district composed of students of color. The school district is one of the largest in its region. During the

2019-20 academic year, the school district had 39 schools, with approximately 25,747 students. The student racial composition of the school district was 5.6% Asian, 18.5% Black/African American, 58% Hispanic/Latinx, 17% White, and 1.3% other (including Multi-Racial students and Indigenous American). Of these students, 12% were English language learners. 17.7% of the student population was composed of students with disabilities. The racial composition of students with disabilities was 2.4% Asian, 22% Black/African American, 56% Hispanic/Latinx, 17.8% White, and 1% other. 76% of students with disabilities received free or reduced lunch. The gender composition of students with disabilities was 34% female and 66%, male.

According to the Information and Reporting Services' 2018-2019 Basic, Educational Data System (BEDS) and Personnel Master File (PMF), there were 1,657 full-time teachers in this district. Of these teachers, 1.8% were Asian, 0.2% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 8.6% were Black or African American, 15.1% were Hispanic/Latinx, 3.6% were Multiracial, 0.1% were Native Hawaiian, and 70.5% were White.

Participants

This research study was conducted using purposeful criteria. This technique is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2015). Further, purposeful sampling was used for this qualitative study to deliberately obtain specific insight from a particular group of people because they are best qualified to provide the necessary information regarding the researched topic (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For a phenomenological study, it is essential for the participants to share common traits and

know or have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Creswell et al., 2003).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) discuss the concept of data saturation. This concept can be described as when researchers seek to discover as many data points as possible to support emerging categories until the categories become saturated with data. The researcher no longer identifies new information. It is used as a criterion to suspend data collection and analysis in qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2017). Once the themes become repetitive, there is no longer a need to collect additional data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Using the data saturation concept and considering Creswell and Poth's (2017) recommendation of including 5 – 25 participants, it was determined that a sample size of 20 participants at the five secondary schools within the district allowed for a clear saturation point (Saunders et al., 2017).

The participants included eight district representatives/designees/administrators, seven licensed special education teachers, four licensed general education teachers, and one licensed related service provider. The researcher selected the participants from an urban school district because the students' profile that they service is primarily composed of students of color. Additionally, these specific participants were chosen because it was important to understand those that play a critical role in or influence special education eligibility, a continuation of services, or declassification. The selection of these particular participants aligns with and supports the utilization of DisCrit as this theoretical framework because its' tenets privilege insider voices charges researchers, educators, and social justice advocates with facilitating a platform that enables discourse about

the lived experiences of students of color and those with disabilities who are impacted by inequity.

To ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and any identifying information was redacted. Table 2 describes each participant and his/her gender, ethnicity, role, and the number of your of experience in the field of education. The sample size was determined based on data saturation after no new findings were introduced. Data saturation was reached after interviewing twenty participants. As such, it was not necessary to conduct additional coding, categorizing, and thematizing. Throughout the findings, the researcher used the CSE members' voices to highlight their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions.

Table 2

Description of Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Role	# of Years in Education
Admin1	Male	White	Administrator	20
Admin2	Male	White	Administrator	28
Admin3	Male	White	Administrator	25
Admin4	Female	Black/African American	Administrator	44
Admin5	Female	Asian	Administrator	14
GenEdT1	Female	White	General Education Teacher	23
GenEdT2	Female	Black/African American	General Education Teacher	19
GenEdT3	Male	Black/African American	General Education Teacher	5
GenEdT4	Male	Hispanic/Latinx	General Education Teacher	27

SCouns1	Female	Black/African American	School Counselor	22
SpEdC1	Female	White	Special Education Chair	25
SpEdC2	Female	Multi-Racial	Special Education Chair	25
SpEdC3	Female	White	Special Education Chair	23
SpEdT1	Male	White	Special Education Teacher	10
SpEdT2	Female	Black/African American	Special Education Teacher	10
SpEdT3	Male	White	Special Education Teacher	12
SpEdT4	Female	White	Special Education Teacher	8
SpEdT5	Female	Black/African American	Special Education Teacher	6
SpEdT6	Female	Black/African American	Special Education Teacher	21
SpEdT7	Male	Black/African American	Special Education Teacher	25

All participants' rights in the study were protected by obtaining approval from the St. John's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection. The (a) purpose of the study, (b) description of the study procedures, (c) risk/discomforts of participating in the study, (d) confidentiality, and other pertinent (e) general information were presented in communication with participants. Participants all signed the consent for participation form before the interview. The researcher explained to participants that at any time, they could voluntarily withdraw from the study. Participants were also provided with the benefits associated with

participating in the study. The researcher ensured that every participant had a clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications, and future consequences of participating in the research study and that they had access to all relevant facts at the time consent was requested/given in discussion before the interview. The consent form (Appendix 4) included a signature/dateline. The completed informed consent for participation form was stored in a secured virtual folder and will remain there for the required amount of time as per the IRB. The researcher is the only person with access to this folder. Lastly, interviews were held in a location that respected the privacy of the participants.

Data Collection Methods

Phenomenology is rooted in questions that give a direction and focus to meaning and themes that sustain an inquiry, awaken further interest and concern, and account for passionate involvement with what is being experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The primary data collection techniques in phenomenology utilized in this study to capture CSE or SCSE members' lived experiences were individual interviews. This method was selected because not only is it optimal for data collection (Mapp, 2008), it is an enriching experience that contributes to the creation of knowledge (Kvale, 1996). Table 3 outlines the data collection methods and the subsequent order in which they were conducted.

Table 3

Data Collection Methods

In Depth-Interviews	Documents
• One, short, thirty- to forty-five – minute, virtual, one-on-one, semi-structured interview with each	• Field notes from interviews • Audio recorded interview transcripts

research participant

Interviews

The interview has become the main data collection procedure closely associated with qualitative, human scientific research (Magnus, 2012). For this study, audio-recorded semi-structured in-depth virtual interviews were used to gather data as a means to exhaust or saturate the topic. Appendix 2 articulates the interview protocol, which is composed of open-ended interview questions that explore the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE or SCSE regarding race and ability and its influence, if at all, on declassification. The semi-structured interview framework allowed the researcher the flexibility to not only probe participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about race, ability, and declassification but also to inquire about additional information and clarification. The nature of semi-structured interviews also allows for spontaneity in questioning and discussion (Kvale, 1996) and increased autonomy and freedom for participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences and add details to their responses (Kvale, 1996; Van Manen, 2016). Twenty interviews were conducted for this study, all of which utilized the same protocols (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Although each virtual interview duration varied, none were longer than one hour and sixteen minutes. They always began with the researcher establishing rapport with each participant and gaining informed consent.

Field Notes

Moustakas (1994) states that the primary data from many interview studies are transcripts and field notes. With consent, the researcher recorded the discussion facilitated in each in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interview. The researcher also recorded field notes after each interview. The researcher recorded what he heard, saw, experienced, and thought in collecting and reflecting on the data and anything else that was not obvious in the recording (Moustakas, 1994). The field notes included notes about follow-up questions, ideas for analysis, theoretical insights, interview strategies, reflections, "hunches," and patterns that emerged.

Data Collection Procedures

Once the dissertation committee approved the study, the researcher immediately applied for approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and began the urban school district's IRB approval process. Once the school district granted its approval, the researcher conducted outreach via e-mail and phone to school building administrators to recruit CSE or SCSE members to participate in the research study. Creswell discusses the importance of identifying and choosing the appropriate candidates for interviews. As such, recruiting participants who were willing to discuss their experiences was of utmost importance to the researcher (Creswell, 2017). Once the participants were identified, the researcher required that they sign and submit a consent form. After consent forms were signed, the researcher conducted virtual in-depth one-on-one interviews via Zoom. The researcher actively engaged in constant comparative analysis. This concept will be discussed in the section below. The interview sessions lasted between approximately 29 minutes to 1

hour and 16 minutes in duration. The interviews were audio-recorded and uploaded to Otter.ai to transcribe. As outlined above, the researcher took handwritten field notes during the interview session.

Recruitment

The recruitment process began after the school district approved the research application. The researcher began by contacting school principals via email to elicit the principals' interest in the research study. The researcher met with principals to discuss (a) the research design/methodology, (b) how the research findings would be used, (c) the researcher's credentials, (d) the rationale for selecting their school and school district, (e) how research participants would be identified/recruited, and (f) and (g) the IRB approval letter from the school district and St. John's University. Although the school district approved the study, participants were informed that they did not participate in this research study.

To recruit participants, the researcher requested to schedule meetings with school staff; however, due to COVID-19, administrators communicated that these meetings occurred once a month and were not appropriate for discussing the research project. As a result, the principal agreed to recommend participants based on the initial discussion of the research study. Once the principal recommended participants, the researcher used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants from recommended acquaintances or colleagues of existing participants who had already been accepted as participants in the study. The researcher employed a snowball sampling method because it enabled him to reach populations that were otherwise

difficult to sample while simultaneously ensuring that participants met the criteria of the study (Creswell, 2017).

The researcher sent potential participants a recruitment letter, consent form, and district IRB approval based on participants' recommendations. Prospective participants who heard about the study also contacted the researcher to express their interest in taking part in the study.

Below is the outlined recruitment process:

1. The researcher contacted building administrators to discuss the research project.
2. The building administrator recommended participants.
3. Prospective participants, recommended by other participants or the building administrator, contacted the researcher expressing interest in participating in the study.
4. The researcher e-mailed prospective participants a consent for participation, a recruitment letter, the school district's approval to conduct research, and a Zoom invitation link to meet virtually.
5. At the beginning of the Zoom meeting, the researcher used the recruitment script, the consent for participation form, and an interview introduction protocol to discuss the research project in detail. During this Zoom meeting, participants were screened for possible participation in the study. The criteria for participation were that they must actively serve in the following roles: (a) district representatives/designees/administrators, (b) licensed special education teachers, (c) licensed general education teachers, and (d) licensed

related service providers. These criteria were discussed and validated in person during the recruitment process.

6. After participants were informed about the research and they signed and submitted the consent form, they had the opportunity to notify the researcher whether they intended to participate during the discussion or at a later date scheduled by them and the researcher (the researcher's phone number and email were included in the consent, and recruitment script forms).
7. Participants in this research were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could decide not to participate during any part of the research, even if they agreed to participate and changed their minds later. This was also indicated in the consent for participation form that they signed.
8. Participants who met the criteria and agreed to participate in the research study were interviewed using the questions outlined in Appendix 2.

Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative scholars contend that data collection and data analysis are simultaneous processes in qualitative research that seek to make meaning of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Creswell, 2018;). Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to these processes as constant comparative analysis. Constant comparative analysis aids in identifying patterns, coding data, categorizing and theming findings, and the overall analysis of transcriptions (Creswell, 2017). This is because the data analysis brings the researcher closer to the data and provides an opportunity to improve the interview process. The researcher used the research

questions as a guide to group and analyzed data. The researcher transcribed the recordings from the interviews and organized and coded themes that emerge using Dedoose software (Dedoose, 2016). Dedoose is a qualitative software program that enables researchers to organize (code) research data. The codes organized in Dedoose were used to highlight participants' responses and to identify emerging themes subsequently. Dedoose also enabled the researcher to become familiar with the interview data and suspend bias as it elicits direct participant quotations/responses.

Data analysis in phenomenology is characterized by (a) bracketing the researcher's personal experiences regarding the phenomena (epoche), (b) the "horizontalization" of data, (c) textual analysis, (d) structural analysis, and (e) providing a composite conclusion of the collected data (Creswell, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher prioritized epoche, or bracketing, to limit and suspend biases and preconceived notions to ultimately ensure objectivity during the process of data analysis (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). While the researcher was able to suspend his personal experiences regarding the perceptions of race and ability during data collection and analysis, he also employed an interpretive approach to introduce personal understandings as they added to the essence of the phenomenon as well as the conclusions drawn from the research study (Creswell, 2007). An interpretive approach meant that the researcher could include his history, culture, and personal experiences (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher engaged in the "horizontalization" of data, which included analyzing specific and relevant quotes and responses from the participant (Creswell, 2007). The researcher engaged in textual analysis in which he wrote verbatim

descriptions of what was expressed by participants. Next, he engaged in structural analysis as a vehicle to interpret how participants expressed their perceptions. The researcher then identified and coded responses. After this process, the researcher organized the codes into categories. The categories were then grouped thematically, and emerging themes were collected and analyzed to connect the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. In the end, the researcher stated his findings, created a report, and later provided a discussion.

Security Plan

The researcher does not identify the school district. All identifying details have been changed to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and school districts. The researcher indicated that the school district is urban to improve the usefulness of the study. In other words, one of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to study individuals in context. Specific actions or events described by participants during interviews were generalized. Any information that threatened the participants' safety or facilitated retaliation from school faculty and staff was carefully worded not to implicate them or was not included in the study. Participants, however, did not make this request. Although minimal, the possible loss of confidentiality is also a risk. Participation in this study was voluntary, so any decision to stop or not participate in the study due to discomfort was warranted and encouraged. The researcher is the only person with access to where the data was stored. The researcher will destroy the consent forms and the raw data after the required amount of time as per the IRB.

All data collected was stored on a password-protected laptop and desktop computer with unique identification of authorized users, password protection, anti-virus controls, firewall configuration, and scheduled or automatic backups to protect against data loss or theft to ensure adequate data security. All hard copy and electronic data were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access, disclosure, or loss. There was no identifying information included with the data. Pseudonyms were used for participants to maintain their confidentiality.

Trustworthiness of the Design

The researcher established trustworthiness by employing the qualitative paradigm components to establish that the findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is critical to qualitative research and refers to the data's truth or the participant's views and the researcher's interpretation and representation (Cope, 2014). As such, the researcher collected data until saturation was reached. Dependability refers to the consistency of results over time (Hayashi, Abib & Hoppen, 2019) and the degree to which, if at all, the study could be replicated by other researchers. Confirmability specifies the degree to which the researcher is transparent in providing comprehensive details about the research procedures. Transferability refers to the degree to which research can be generalized or applied to other settings and in different contexts. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher used the following strategies: (a) peer review, (b) reflexivity (c) audit trails, (d) audit (e) thick description.

Peer review

The researcher used peer review as a strategy to establish credibility by critically engaging in discussion and debriefing with his dissertation chair, committee, and fellow St. John's University Doctorate of Education cohort members.

Reflexivity

In the above section, the researcher discussed that field notes would record thoughts, feelings, uncertainties, values, beliefs, and assumptions that surface throughout the research process (Carlson, 2010). Additionally, in the below section, the researcher has practiced reflexivity and epoche by explicitly disclosing his biases, assumptions, and aspects of his background that could have influenced interpretations and significantly influenced developing the research and participant engagement (Carlson, 2010).

Thick description

The researcher provided detailed thick and detailed descriptions of settings, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures to make accounts more credible and transferable and show that he was diligent in his attempts to conduct respectable and rigorous research (Carlson, 2010). The researcher provided thick, rich descriptions to draw the reader more closely into the story or narrative to increase coherence and evoke feelings and a sense of connection with the study participants (Creswell & Miller 2000).

Audit trails

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants' responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014). The researcher demonstrated confirmability by developing audit trails. Creating an audit trail refers to keeping careful documentation of all the study components, should an external auditor be utilized (Carlson, 2010). Not only will the researcher keep all documents for up to 3 years as outlined in the security plan, but he will also provide rich quotes from participants that depict accurate emerging themes derived directly from the data and not his own biases or preconceived notions. The researcher provided thorough decision-making descriptions of the recursive thematic coding process during the data collection and analysis stage.

Positionality

The researcher identifies as a Black and African-American, heterosexual, able-bodied male. He has attended public school in urban school districts in the northeast region of the United States and is employed by an urban public school district. As an employee in an educational setting, the researcher primarily serves students who mostly identify as Black/African- American or Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx. For the researcher, the nature of the world is one constructed upon power relationships rooted in race. For this reason, to the researcher, the race is one of the most important salient aspects of one's identity due to the pervasive reaches of White supremacy and endemic racism. As such, naturally, the researcher was at risk of engaging in confirmation bias, which means that he may seek confirmation while avoiding participant accounts that depart from his belief.

Conclusion

In Chapter 3, the researcher justified the decision to use a qualitative research design and employ phenomenology as a vehicle to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. The researcher articulated (a) the decision-making process as it pertained to selecting a sample and size, (b) the ethical recruitment of participants, (c) the setting and how access to the research site was gained, and his choice to conduct in-depth, semi-structured virtual interviews as a data collection method. The researcher also discussed (a) data analysis procedures and (b) outlined strategies to enhance trustworthiness. The research processes and theoretical frameworks described were applied to analyzing collected data and developing interpretations described in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. Specifically, the study sought to examine whether a relationship exists between perceptions of race and ability and the disproportionate declassification rates in urban school districts. A void in the research that explores the rate at which these students remain in special education and the forces/factors that may contribute to why this phenomenon compelled my interest to investigate school-based educational stakeholders' perspectives.

The study employed a qualitative research design, Phenomenology, which at its core is an attempt to deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life, and it further aligns with my research interest (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). The results reflect school-based educational stakeholders' voices and share a deep perspective into their lived experiences. To examine the perceptions of race and ability and the disproportionate declassification rates in urban school districts, a research framework was established that sought to address the following four primary research questions:

1. What are the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education toward declassification?
2. How, if at all, do the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about race influence declassification?

3. How, if at all, do the perception/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about ability influence declassification?

4. In what ways does the ethnicity of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education influence their perceptions/attitudes about declassification?

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the collected data according to themes that emerged from the research questions. This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the data collected through interviewing twenty-two participants. The sample size was determined based on data saturation after no new findings were introduced. Data saturation was reached after interviewing twenty participants. As such, it was not necessary to conduct additional coding, categorizing, and thematizing. Throughout the findings, the researcher used the CSE members' voices to highlight their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions. Table 4 outlines the themes and subthemes that emerged from each research question.

Table 4

Overarching Themes and Sub Themes

Research Question(s)	Themes and Sub Theme(s)
Research Question #1: What are the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education toward declassification?	1. Mixed Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward Declassification Exist 1.1. Proponents of declassification 1.2. Opponents of declassification 1.3. Perception of declassification dependent upon the student. 2. Declassification is Rare 3. Multiple Factors May Influence Declassification

	3.1. CSE members may influence declassification 3.1.1. CSE members' knowledge of declassification and the special education process 3.1.2. A variance in comprehensive IEP meetings exists 3.1.3. Pedagogy and support may influence declassification 3.1.4. The stigma of special education may influence declassification 3.2. Students may influence declassification 3.2.1.1. Gender may influence declassification 3.2.1.2. Students' socioeconomic status may influence declassification 3.2.1.3. Students' home life may influence declassification. 3.3. School districts may influence declassification
Research Question #2: How, if at all, do the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about race influence declassification?	1. CSE Members' Perceptions of Race 2. Racial Groups are Treated Differently 3. Perceptions of Families of Color May Exist 4. Racial Groups May Perceive Special Education Differently 5. Teacher Bias About Students May Exist and Influence the Special Education Process 6. Race May Influence Declassification
Research Question #3: How, if at all, do the perception/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about ability influence declassification?	1. Variance Exists in the Purpose/Goals of Special Education 2. An Emphasis on Mainstreaming Within the school district exists 3. Perceptions of the Definition of Ability

	4. Barriers May Exist that Prevent Educators From Accurately Assessing Students' Ability 5. A Variance Exists in How CSE Members View the Abilities of SWD's 6. Academic and Behavioral Achievement May Influence Declassification 7. Students are Placed in Special Education Due to Academic and Behavioral Concerns
Research Question #4: In what ways does the ethnicity of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education influence their perceptions/attitudes about declassification?	1. Among CSE Members, Different Perceptions of the Definition of race exist 2. Being Part of a Racial Group Has Defining Characteristics 3. Differences May Exist in How Racial Groups Perceive or Experience Race 4. Mixed Experiences of How the Role Race Plays in How Participants are Viewed

Research Question #1: CSE Members' Perceptions Toward Declassification

Theme 1: Mixed Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward Declassification Exist

The findings suggest that CSE members' perceptions of declassification were mixed. Some participants were proponents or opponents of declassification in general, and there were others whose perceptions were dependent upon the individual student. Some participants noted that declassification was only considered when students were high achieving. Overall, most indicated that it was a rare occurrence. This section will provide an in-depth understanding of participant's varying perceptions of the impact of declassification on students.

1.1 Proponents of Declassification. Several participants responded positively to the notion of declassification. It is noted that many of them had not seen cases of

declassification within their district; therefore, their responses were primarily hypothetical. Nonetheless, participant responses reveal that some CSE members believe that declassification, if/when appropriate, can have positive impacts on students that transcend the classroom.

The perspective of supportive respondents appeared to be related to the students' social and emotional well-being. They reported that declassification would lead to students feeling a sense of accomplishment and increased social-emotional well-being attainment. SpEdC3, a white female special education department chair with over 23 years of experience in education, stated that declassification,

> Boosts your confidence to know that they (students with disabilities) no longer have an IEP, and they no longer need to leave the classroom for separate location and testing. - *SpEdC3*

Similarly, Admin4, an African-American female administrator with over 44 years of experience in education, expressed:

> That it (declassification) also would help them in terms of socialization and emotionally because you don't have that stigma of special education at all. Or you went to special ed classes, you know. - *Admin4*

While both participants discussed ways in which declassification might positively impact students (i.e., increased confidence and social-emotional well-being), they also uncovered a perception that special education's stigma can have a negative effect on students with disabilities. These effects might manifest themselves in how students with disabilities view themselves and the services that they receive and how others (family, classmates, friends, educational stakeholders) view or perceive them.

Positive participant responses suggest that declassification might remove students' feelings of the stigma related to special education and support their self-esteem. These responses also suggest that declassification may inspire increased socialization. SpEdT3, a white male special education teacher with over 12 years of experience in education, states that declassification:

> Could inspire them to advocate for themselves even more and inspire them to be even more outgoing and more social, so it really honestly would depend on the child and how they have viewed and use the supports. - *SpEdT3*

When asked how declassification might impact students with disabilities, some participants responded that it might promote a sense of achievement. Admin2, a white male administrator with over 28 years of experience in education, stated:

> I think they feel a sense of accomplishment. I think they feel like they've been released from the pipeline, and they've been pleased. So this is just a natural progression, their growth as a child academically, but I think it's a sense of relief. - *Admin2*

This particular response reveals that declassification is a natural progression and process that denotes students' growth. It is when a student has met their measurable annual goals and demonstrates that they can achieve academically in a general education setting without the mandated supports and modifications outlined in their IEP. Admin2 also expressed that a student who exits special education feels as if they are "released from a pipeline." While the participant did not elaborate on what this pipeline is or might be, in the context of this study, one can interpret it to mean that students are freed from a life sentence of inferior education with limited postsecondary options.

Lastly, some participants believed that students' chances of success in the post-secondary environment would be enhanced if they were declassified. This is suggested when Admin4 stated:

> You know, it would give them better opportunities at jobs. I think we would give them better chances that at higher education, you know, how they would be impacted by declassification on the positive side, you know, and all.- *Admin4*

1.2 Opponents of declassification. While there were proponents to declassification, there were also those who articulated that it may lead to a loss of needed services and that it would have a negative impact on students, particularly at the high school level. SpEdC1, a white female special education department chair with over 25 years of experience in education, stated:

> If the student is in general ed taking Regents *[New York State high school coursework]* level courses and receiving support and can move on to college, tech school, why would I take away any additional services or supports. To me, that would be an injustice. - *SpEdC1*

Ultimately, non-supportive respondents' perspective to declassification appeared to be rooted in the concern that students may not succeed without support. SpEdC1 also says that the removal of special education services from particular students is an injustice. While this statement is fair, it is also an assumption that does not account for students with disabilities who perform well academically with supports and demonstrate the capacity to be successful exclusively in the general education setting and/or be declassified.

Several participants communicated that declassification was not appropriate for many students and would lose testing modifications and other "safety net" options. SpEdT3 stated:

> If you or I were thrown into a situation where we had support for years and years and years. And then it was just we're going in blind. Even we would struggle too. That's been compounded ten times with a student in special education because they grow to need it, not as a crutch but as a safety net. And sometimes, knowing that the safety net is there allows them to take chances that they wouldn't academically or socially, or behaviorally. - *SpEdT3*

1.3 Perception of declassification dependent upon the student. Some respondents were willing to leave it up to students to decide whether or not they wanted to be declassified in cases where they were meeting academic requirements. However, the majority expressed uncertainty about students' ability to cope with or adjust to the demands and realities of the general education setting (i.e., class size, academic rigor, soft skills) where they would not get as much support from their teachers. GenEdT2, an African-American female general education teacher with over nineteen years of experience in the field of education, states:

> I think they're gonna be impacted in a big way because they're having a complete social shift, you know, they're used to being in probably in a 15-to-1, and now they're in like a class of like 30, or in New York City, 34 students. So that could be like a really big adjustment. Um, but, it all depends on the student, I assume, like can they handle it. Do they have the grit to handle it? Does special ed help them with, you know, help them to deal with that situation? - *GenEdT2*

SpEdT7, an African-American special education teacher with over twenty-five years of experience in the field of education added,

> Most of the time (students), they don't show that independence where you feel comfortable that they can succeed on their own. - *SpEdT7*

He went on to state:

> I don't put my opinion on the kids; it's whatever the kids want. That's what I always recommend. I let them know, you know, like this year I have a few students that I'm going to, you know, let them know that they can be declassified if they want. That's up to them. That's something they have to

> discuss with their parents, and just then when we have the meeting, then they will have to decide what they want. So, you know, I just, I would just throw it out to them, like, you know, if you become declassified, you won't have the services you won't get the extended time, and stuff like that. If that's what you want, you could do. - *SpEdT7*

SpEdT7 communicated the perception that while many of his students do not demonstrate the capacity necessary to be successful in the general education setting, some are candidates for declassification. SpEdT7 did offer a note of caution in that although these students are candidates for declassification, the removal of services and accommodations can have adverse effects.

A subtheme emerged that suggested a consensus amongst participants' perception of declassification as a realistic option only for select students, based on whether they were at the elementary or high school level, whether they were excelling academically, or whether they would manage behaviorally. SpEdT3 discussed specifically when declassification should be an option for particular students as well as the adverse effect that it may have on them:

> I think that declassification in high school shouldn't even be an option. I think if you're going to declassify a student, it needs to be done in the elementary, because if you declassified someone when they reached the high school level, you're really doing a disservice to them because they've gone through at least eight or nine years into nine grades, with these supports. And then to take them away, and just say, Okay, here you go. Good luck. It really is. It could lead them to struggle even more than if it's a gradual takeaway or gradual declassification. - *SpEdT3*

When asked whether declassification was discussed at IEP meetings as an option for students, SpEdT7 stated:

> The only time we have that discussion is like for our top students, students that are doing very well, like students that are on the honor roll every quarter, who really don't need our assistance, then we'll discuss that with the parent and the child and see if they would want that option. - *SpEdT7*

Admin1, an administrator with 20 years of experience in the field of education, echoed SpEdT7's perception:

> Well, it's realistic, because, and again, I think it's realistic for a small group in special education, you know, because sometimes some students as I stated before, get identified, you know, because of behavior, and then you know, that behavior is impeding their education. -*Admin1*

Theme 2: Declassification is Rare

Participant responses and accounts suggest that declassification is rare, especially for high school students. Only a few participants had been in CSE meetings where declassification was the outcome. GenEdT1, a white female general education teacher with over twenty-three years of experience in the field of education, discussed her experience with declassification:

> I deal with a lot of special education students, but I've been in education for 23 years, and I don't think I've ever had any of my students, in particular, declassified. - *GenEdT1*

When describing her experience with declassification SpEdT5, an African-American female special education teacher with over six years of experience in the field of education, added:

> Me, Myself, I participated in three of them (meetings that led to declassification) thus far, which was done at the early childhood level. So, I know I was told that well, you can't rush because declassification is a process, but then the declassification also does come with at least two years of leeway, just in case the child is not fully ready to be on his or her own, they can always have that cushion to bounce back on. - *SpEdT5*

Participants also noted that declassification was only considered when parents insisted or if students excelled academically; however, students were rarely declassified at the upper grades. Additionally, SpEdT7 expressed that it is more likely that a parent advocated for their child to receive more special education services than to be declassified:

> Every CSE I've always been a part of is either trying to get a kid service. They will get invited to a CSE meeting because a parent is trying to get services for their kid. So I will be invited to that. I was never invited to a declassification. I don't even think they have CSE meetings for declassification. I think they just would do it at the annual review meeting. -*SpEdT7*

As seen in Admin3's, a white male administrator with over 25 years of education in education responded that participants did not always understand the meaning of declassification, using the term interchangeably to reduce restrictive placements.

> Previously I think we've only had one student, one or two, exit our special ed program into mainstream. And that was because it was more the parents wanted that to happen. -*Admin3*

Theme 3: Multiple factors may influence declassification

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of collected data suggests that multiple factors influenced declassification. These factors were divided into three sub-themes and nine distinct categories within those subthemes, as listed in Table 3.

3.1 CSE members influence declassification.

3.1.1 CSE members' knowledge of declassification and the special education process.

Several participants mentioned knowledge of the special education system as being instrumental to parent advocacy. They indicated that informed parents could have a greater influence on the educational trajectory of their children. SpEdT5 expressed a perception that parents of students with disabilities are not familiar with both the special education and high school processes. According to SpEdT5, this lack of knowledge adversely affects parents' capacity to advocate for declassification on behalf of their children effectively:

> Our parents are uneducated. I think that's a big factor. Um, I think our parents have not been educated on high school education but uneducated as far as like, how to advocate for the child, or how to get in the right support for the child to come and get them out of special education a little bit earlier. So, parents are not given that training that they need, or they're not even being told, like, Oh, you could get a lawyer to fight so you could get A, B, C, and D. So uneducated, as far as special education is concerned, so they feel like you know once that kid is in there, you know, is lifelong support. - *SpEdT5*

In much the same way that SpEdT5 described knowledge of the special education system as instrumental to parent advocacy and informed parents could have a greater influence on their children's educational trajectory. SpEdT2, an African-American female special education teacher with over ten years of experience in the field of education, states:

> They [*parents*] might not have educational knowledge or the background to know what the rights of my, my child are, so that's part of it. And then again, cultural perceptions. So there's the parent who's most feeling inferior as they walk into the room, unfortunately. And then there's the teacher who is looking down on the parent and looking down on the student. And so then the student's best interest in declassification is not coming into play at all. And if you're not knowledgeable of the process then, you're lucky if you receive it. You're going to receive the bare minimum. - *SpEdT2*

Both SpEdT5 and SpEdT2 acknowledge that parent knowledge of the special education process influences declassification. GenEdT2 takes this perception a step further, expressing frustration with parents not questioning decision making during the special education process:

> Okay, so they (parents) don't advocate they don't question. They just say, oh, you're a professional, you know what to do, you're doing the best thing, and it's not necessarily true. You have to question; you have to advocate for your child like, "why are you placing my child? how are we moving forward? What's the progression?" like "is my child gonna stay in special education for all of their school years?" "Is this how it's going to be?" So, I think that one of the biggest reasons is that parents don't advocate for their children, parents don't know, sometimes, especially like in New York City if you have

> immigrant parents, they don't, they always assume the authority is right.- *GenEdT2*

GenEdT2 charges parents to question educational stakeholders during the IEP process to ensure that CSE or SCSE members make decisions in their children's best interest. She also expresses the perception that immigrant parents in urban school districts, such as the New York City Department of Education, are hesitant to advocate for their children due to school officials' perceived positional authority.

Admin1 shared his experience with a parent who leveraged his knowledge to advocate on his behalf when he was a student:

> Well, my father happens to be a retired public-school teacher. So you know, he was very familiar with the process. He was very familiar with, you know, what needed to be done. And he saw based on, you know, the grades I was bringing home and deficiencies that there was a problem. So he advocated, you know, he was my strongest advocate that, you know, that I had. ……. it would have been a completely different path that they would have, that the school would have led me down, where my dad was like, "Nope, that's a decision that we will make, and we're going to provide him, you know, that capability to do college if he wants to." - *Admin1*

In this regard, some race-based observations were made, indicating that Caucasian parents tended to be better informed and more likely to work with an advocate both in terms of getting services or discontinuing them. GenEdT3, an African-American male general education teacher with over five years of experience in the field of education, stated:

> On the other end of the spectrum, I've known of or have heard of our Caucasian counterparts, where parents are actually fighting to get their students classified because they are privy to certain privileges that come along with it. Not really meaning that the child really needs it, but they know that okay as my son or daughter they will be able to take two hours to take a one-hour test, you know, they know these privileges. - *GenEdT3*

SpEdC2, a multi-racial female special education department chair with over 25 years of experience in the field of education, also added:

> Most Caucasian families they could demand, and maybe it's because of their knowledge of special education, the majority of the time, they will come to the table with an advocate. And so if they're aware of their resources and what they're entitled to. They will receive. - *SpEdC2*

Both GenEdT3 and SpEdC2 offer their perspectives on how Caucasian families are more knowledgeable about the special education process, thus providing them with the necessary foundation to effectively advocate for their children, whether it is warranted or not. Further, the perceptions of GenEdT3 and SpEdC2 suggest that special education signifies opportunity and privilege to Caucasian families because of the accommodations and services.

According to collected data, and contrary to participant perceptions of Caucasian parents, respondents believed that African-American families did not know the special education process, thus impacting their ability to advocate on behalf of their children effectively. Admin4 stated:

> Yeah, put it on the parents. African American parents. One, they don't come to the meetings; they don't ask the questions. I don't know if it's because, and I always say maybe it's because they need to know more about special ed to sit in the meeting and ask questions, and yes, you can declassify kids. - *Admin4*

Admin4 expressed that parent attendance at CSE or SCSE meetings and their knowledge, or the lack thereof, of the special education process, is why their children remain in special education and why they are underrepresented in declassification data. Admin4 stated African-American parents are not equipped with the knowledge necessary to advocate for their children with vigor and conviction.

A few participants were not aware of the declassification process but assumed it occurred once they were academically successful. They did not recall having received any official information from the district on declassification practices or policies. Both SpEdC3 and Admin5, an Asian female administrator with over 14 years of experience in the field of education, expressed a lack of understanding and concrete knowledge about declassification:

> Like I said, I don't know the actual declassification process. So that's definitely something that I need to actually hang up the phone with you. I am probably going to call down to read my paperwork and then call down to the Board of Ed. - *SpEdC3*

> I'm not very aware of special education laws and regulations. I mean, I know some, but since I don't oversee writing in-depth, I rely on other people. - *Admin5*

Additionally, while SpEdT7 described a relatively correct declassification process, both GenEdT3 and Admin3 were not sure.

> Well, I know what one process is the parents do not want the service anymore any longer. Regardless of whether it's needed or not, they can, you know, write a letter requesting that the child be declassified, and that's one way. Another way is through student's academic performance if they are performing well, and the services are no longer needed. And they'll be declassified like that. - *SpEdT7*

> I'm really not a special ed teacher or anything like that, but I do teach special ed kids, but I would think my assumption is that, if, if, if a child meets certain benchmarks over a specific period of time, then they would take that data and make a decision. I guess maybe at the end of the year. But that I'm not 100% sure. I'm not aware of it, but I'm sure there is. - *GenEdT3*

> I know that if you're declassified apparently, well, let's just say what I think I know is. I don't think that it necessarily means you leave special ed and go into general ed. I just think that it could. I think that it could be a reduction in some of your services, you know, a chance to mainstream in certain courses. But ultimately, I guess it could mean a full exit from special education. I think that there would be an IEP meeting, you know, an annual meeting, and based on goals in the IEP, if that child is meeting and exceeding goals in all areas, then I would say that the process could begin for declassification. -*Admin3*

3.1.2 A variance in comprehensive IEP meetings exists. The participants' responses indicated that some meetings were more comprehensive than others, though the majority appeared fairly thorough at the high school level. Most of the individuals directly involved in the meetings, usually the special education teachers, described a fairly detailed process. SpEdT1, a white male special education teacher with ten years of experience within the field of education, reflected on IEP meetings, recalling:

> It's a joke. In my previous school, we had serious meetings that were like 40 minutes to an hour-long meeting. To transition into this school district is my fifth year, and the IEP meeting is about 15 minutes to half an hour. They're not always involved in the meetings. Which is - that's just how I guess how it is there, you know. But it's very, very quick meetings. Yeah, because they are like half an hour meetings and there is strict scheduling with that, there's not really that much opportunity, but students are involved, parents are involved, how much they talk. If they show up, if we're able to reach them, that's a whole 'nother conversation. - *SpEdT1*

In much the same way that SpEdT1expressed his experiences around seemingly ineffective IEP meetings, SpEdT2 discussed how IEP meetings are "over before they start," stating:

> I would say honestly, for the most part, the IEP meetings that I've been in have not been really, it's literally like, it's not a discussion of okay this is what I think the student needs. Everything's done - like the IEP is completed already by the time it gets to the time for the IEP meeting, the IEP is done. It's more of us telling what we and the IEP teacher has decided. - *SpEdT2*

While both SpEdT1 and SpEdT2 express frustration with their experiences around IEP meetings, SpEdT2 also adds that there are meetings that are carried out that are rather comprehensive

> So what's done first, before the IEP meeting even happens, each, each teacher receives pretty much a sheet that they fill out that says how the students are doing academically, the students are doing behaviorally. And then, the teacher

> writes like a little summary of how the student is doing; those sheets are read to the parent. So every single teacher's report is read, then the special education department representative will go through the student's transcript and go through whether or not the student is on track to graduate. And if there are any reports from, let's say, service providers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, things of that sort, that happens as well. Those are read to the parent. And then, the parent is asked if they have any concerns to the IEP are gone over in terms of like social student-student social development. Any behavioral concerns are addressed. And then, the department representatives will say okay; as a committee, we have decided this student will remain in the same setting next year and receive whatever services they are is receiving. Are you in agreement, and a parent will say yes or no? And then conclude the IEP meeting. - *SpEdT2*

SpEdT6, an African-American female special education teacher with twenty-one years of experience in the field of education, added:

> So, the parent-student, and any related agencies or organizations are invited as a general a teacher is invited, who is teaching that student and a draft of the IEP have been written and the related service providers are submitting progress reports, and if there are any issues that we may want to discuss in terms of movement. We have discussed it with the parents. Prior to the meeting, so that there are no surprises. And so, at that meeting, we go through transcripts, report cards progress notes on anything interesting and exciting. Good news, any type of career transition plans that we have. And we ask the parent. What are their feelings? Are they pleased? Do they have any questions any concerns, we ask the student to interview them at that time; you know, are you on track; what electives were you looking to take. Are you interested in college courses? And then we make recommendations based on what the student is at that moment in time, and then we plan for the upcoming year? And hopefully, it is a smooth meeting with no surprises. And once everything is planned, we look for agreement with all the members, and then we, if we need to do any tweaking, we do it right then and there, and then the parent gets a copy when it's been, you know, completed. - *SpEdT6*

When asked about all CSE members' equity of voice during IEP meetings, participants responded that a teacher-led the meetings. Still, there was an opportunity for parents, students, and other teachers to express their views. Some teachers solicited views from parents before the meetings as well. However, there was an acknowledgment that parents may not always feel comfortable speaking up. SpEdT4,

a white female special education teacher with over eight years of experience in education, stated:

> So the parents have to be involved, students have to be involved. And everybody from their art teacher to their science teacher to their yearly teacher is involved. So I would say that the most important voice is the parents, right? We need to enhance the clap, and parents are the other hands. And so I would definitely say that everyone has a strong voice and, more importantly, the child that they are held to what they are comfortable with. We encourage the students to participate as much as possible. Because I tell them it's your meeting, you know, we need to hear your voice, we need to know what you want, you know, are we meeting your needs in terms of where you want to go after high school. Our kids' advocacy is very important, and many of them are. – *SpEdT4*

SpEdT6 explained:

> I think the parents are intimidated at these meetings because of the people that are sitting there and the level of education that is represented by the team. I think a lot of times, people just kind of sit there and accept what's handed to them. – *SpEdT6*

Components of SpEdT4 and SpEdT6's response, specifically parent intimidation during IEP meetings, echo similar sentiments to the sub-theme mentioned above that knowledge of the special education system is instrumental to parent advocacy that informed parents could have a greater influence in effectively advocating on behalf of their children.

When asked to describe or whether there was equity of voice during IEP meetings, GenEdT1 stated:

> No, honestly. There are some teachers who are not as vocal as others like I find that I'm always very vocal and but again, that's because I have a lot, extra time with the particular individual. I don't know, and there are some, there are some academic teachers that are, you know, very vocal as well but, um, I think that's one of the reasons why I am, but there is definitely some teachers that don't say much on the other a lot. - *GenEdT1*

Admin5 added:

> Sometimes we need a translator because students and families sometimes might need that translation from thinking so either. We have an outside translator, or we have a translator within the building. - *Admin5*

GenEdT4, a Hispanic/Latinx male general education teacher with over twenty-seven years of experience in the field of education, offered a contrasting perspective to that of GenEdT1:

> I mean, even for everyone there, right, everyone's like, yeah, you know, I think that a lot of times, at least in our school like, I don't ever really see any kind of like people talking down like the teachers are talking down to the parent or the kids. Parents are very vocal. You know it's on his now and then, you know, that might be a parent is kind of quiet and just kind of sits there, you know, yeah whatever students, students are a little vocal too, you know, so they get the stay and speak up and say what they want to. I never see it like, you know, when they talk down to them. - *GenEdT4*

When asked whether declassification was a standing item on IEP meeting agendas, participants responded that it generally was not a standard agenda item and is brought up mostly when requested by parents. GenEdT1 stated:

> I have never been in a meeting where declassification was even discussed. I can't speak for that. - *GenEdT1*

SpEdC3 added:

> So, I have monthly meetings with the Board of Ed, and to be honest, declassification never on the agenda. So that's why I said I have some homework to do. I would just say, um, maybe our parents aren't as involved or still don't understand the process of declassification or that that's even a possibility, to be honest, it typically isn't discussed. - *SpEdC3*

SpEdT2 went on to state:

> By the time our students get to high school, I think they've been in special education for so long, like in special education again, it's like, almost as if it's a place rather than a service, but they've been receiving special education services for so long that it seems that I'm trying to I……Nobody brings it up as unless there's a student who does exceptionally, like, well, there is no, and even then it's just a talk of mainstreaming right for one specific class let's try it out. Let's see how it goes. - *SpEdT2*

3.1.3 Pedagogy and support may influence declassification. Participants expressed that if teachers provided more differentiated instruction and were held accountable, there may be a greater possibility of declassification. However, the responses appeared to be somewhat hypothetical and not referring to actual cases. SpEdT2 discussed the importance of employing research-based pedagogical strategies and interventions (i.e., multi-tiered system of supports) as a vehicle to positively influence declassification and combat inappropriate referrals to and requests for evaluation for special education services:

> I think with the correct interventions and strategies in place, and declassification should be an option for students. I think teachers are too quick to refer students to special education in the first place. I think if we put an intervention in place beforehand, it kind of helps students manage papers that get them sent into special education or help them manage the academic system that they just don't; they don't understand yet. Once those interventions are put in place, students will be able to - I think declassification should be an option for every child except for some severe disability; every child should be given an option to be declassified and just see how they do. Right. Give them the interventions like MTSS, give them the tools to do something to make sure, ensure that they know they have supports there. Then, see how they do. - *SpEdT2*

Admin3 continued and juxtaposed his beliefs and instructional expectations with what he believes transpire in classrooms that serve students with disabilities:

> I'll go back to the fact that many teachers just want to present the material and expect that everybody grasps it the same way. But I would expect that they're differentiating, they're doing different things in the classroom, they're using visuals, that they're using maps and, you know, so as long as a teacher is doing everything within his or her power to excel, the student. I don't think that it all should be put on the child also, I think that you know, there has to be teachers that are differentiating if that kid that child needs differentiation. - *Admin3*

3.1.4 *The stigma of special education may influence declassification.* The participants indicated that parents of students and general education teachers might negatively perceive a special education label. While not leading to declassification, the response indicated an awareness of different schools and beyond perceptions. SCouns1, an African-American school counselor with over twenty-two years of experience in the field of education, expressed:

> A lot of them [*parents*] think that if my child is classified, they're automatically going to go in the self-contained classroom. Kids are going to make fun of them; they're not going to want to be in that class; they're going to be labeled things like that. Or, you know, the mother actually shared with me, what did I do wrong? You know, why did I fall short that now he needs this? - *SCouns1*

SpEdC3 and SpEdT7 disappointedly added:

> Um, but a lot of our kids, you know they're, some of them are very embarrassed by being in our program. - *SpEdC3*

> Students don't like the stigma attached to it. Especially if you're in one of the self-contained classes. They don't like that. And they take offense to it, and they don't want it. And that's when you see like a lot of the students. -*SpEdT7*

SpEdT6 discussed how teachers react to delivering instruction to students with disabilities and how educational stakeholders brand these students with perpetual and implicit deficit feelings, approaches, and interactions:

> As the CSE, as the department Chairman in my building, every September, I have colleagues that come to me and say, Why do I have 15 IEP's in my class? Isn't there a limit to how many IEPS I can have? And I say, the resource kids they have general ed scheduling. You haven't even looked at the kids yet, but you're concerned about the number of IEPS; what does that mean? You haven't read the IEP. So I think the word IEP has such a connotation that the teachers are already prepared that "oh it's going to be harder to teach these individuals," "it's going to be more work for me, and how can they put so many of these individuals in my class?" So I think the declassification doesn't come up because they feel that once you're branded, especially that that's where you stay. And that is something that I don't know how what amount of

> training is going to change the idea for people that don't really; they're not interested in it. - *SpEdT6*

The stigma of special education influences how students with disabilities view themselves and the services they receive and how others (family, classmates, friends, educational stakeholders) view or perceive them. These internalized feelings are a result of societal definitions of normalcy created by ableist bodies.

3.2 Students may influence declassification. When pressed on specific factors that might influence whether or not a student is ready for declassification, participants identified some aspects of the students, including behavioral aspects, gender, socio-economic status, and home life. Several participants explicitly stated that race was not the primary factor, although others did acknowledge the intersection of race and poverty in many students' lives. Some participants noted that some parents are connected to poverty and that some parents receive extra funding from social services and therefore may not want their child to be declassified. Others pointed to parents and students having to work, thereby not being able to devote time to academics. Still, others brought up issues of living in urban areas where students are exposed to bad examples of gangs and other negative influences.

Participants also expressed that students themselves influence declassification, specifically referencing their attendance, whether a student communicated to a teacher that they were ready to move across the special education continuum or exit special education. Both SpEdT5 and SpEdC3 expressed these perceptions:

> Student attendance, which all boils down to just showing up and showing up and giving the best that you have. - *SpEdT5*

> Only a couple of times have I had students say; I think I'm ready for resource. Do you think I can go into resource, like you know I was in English, and you

> know I got a 75 for the year, or, you know, I had an 80 on the Regents Exam. I really think I'm ready to do resource my senior year. So, but that's only happened a couple of times. - *SpEdC3*

SpEdT5 and SpEdC3 alluded that students and their capacity to advocate on their own behalf are critical to and influence declassification. Similar to SpEdC3 perceptions, GenEdT1 expresses that students who develop independence in such a way that they understand both their learning limitations and capabilities are more likely to be declassified:

> I have had a couple, and I've been to that I can think of in all the years that I've been teaching that were such hard workers, and they understood their own disabilities, but therefore they understood how they needed to learn. They knew to ask questions; they knew to read it up themselves or to look at something that would be helpful for them. - *GenEdT1*

3.2.1.1 *Gender may influence declassification.*

When prompted to identify specific factors that might influence whether or not a student is ready for declassification, participants identified their gender. SpEdT7 stated:

> Kind of, I guess it's like a little bias thing, I guess, from the way I see things now females, they seem to work harder be more in tune with their education. Whereas male students they are kind of, you know, last minute, you know, they always they rise to the occasion, but in the process, before they get to rise it's a little shaky so you're like hesitant. So, you know, female students they seem to be more driven. They seem more focused, whereas male students they are all over the place, then you know they still rise to the occasion. - *SpEdT7*

In much the same way that SpEdT7 identified gender bias in special education and gender roles associated with learning, GenEdT2 discussed the perception that while special education is made up of predominantly male students, their female counterparts are more likely to be declassified:

> A lot more males are classified as special education, and I assumed to be declassified that probably more females are declassified than males in special education. - *GenEdT2*

Admin4 underscored the focus on gender and included a racial lens:

> Yeah, with a black male, I just think that you know, as a mother to black males, you know, I just think that the black male just all the time gets a bad rap the minute he acts out of class if he said it in the wrong class. Teachers, don't say you need to be special ed when it's not always Special Ed, you know, I mean you know it maybe you need to mentor, maybe you need somebody to talk to him. - *Admin4*

This response uncovers the stereotypes attributed to black males as they relate to their perceived behavior, how this behavior lands them in and confines them to special education, and how teachers employ ineffective strategies to meet their specific needs.

3.2.1.2 *Students' socioeconomic status may influence declassification.*

When prompted to identify specific factors that might influence declassification, participants identified a students' socioeconomic status. GenEdT4 stated:

> I don't think it has anything to do with racism per se, like, you know they're black or Hispanic, they should stay in this program, I don't think it has to do with that. I think that because they are black or Hispanic, they're still, even though they're in high school, they're still in a poor community. Now they gotta take care of the younger brothers and sisters, or their parents are still going away, or maybe they have to go to work, and they don't maybe don't take education seriously, you know. And they don't, I don't want to say they don't want to put the work in, that's that's not true at all. Quite the opposite, actually, but they just don't get the help they need when they go home, you know, and things like that. And so that's why it's hard for them to get out. You know it's hard for them to get out. And then, and then I also read somewhere that you know their parents are also, you know like, they might be the parents might have become from special ed backgrounds. I actually know family members like that, you know, that their parents have special ed. They're special ed, you know. It just keeps going down, and when they can't - they

> can't get to help them, their parents, because they're limited as well. - *GenEdT4*

GenEdT4 discusses a perception that racism is not the reason why students of color remain in special education. Instead, he describes that the implications of a student's socioeconomic status influence declassification. GenEdT4's perceptions are that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds cannot dedicate more time to their education than their more privileged counterparts, which impacts their academic performance. GenEdT4 also purports that the parents of these students may have been students with classified disabilities themselves. Further, it alludes that the detainment of students of color economically disadvantaged to special education is a cyclical process.

Admin2 went on to note that:

> Mostly socio-economic families coming from a reduced income family or low-income family may present as needing more assistance academically than they really do because of maybe they just don't have time to maybe the kid couldn't be in school, they had to be home, family had to be working. A 16-year-old in high school could be working full time as a waiter or could be working at a car shop and therefore is not getting the academic support they need. But they also are not getting some of the training that we try to send kids to school for the discipline, organization, and structure. Perspective is that there are families who also received financial services, financial benefits from having their children and self in special education settings. - *Admin2*

SpEdT7 differentiates between the privilege, or lack thereof, of students from economically deprived backgrounds compared to their more affluent counterparts. SpEdT1 discusses the perceptions that socio-economic status empowers families by affording them access to resources that may influence the likelihood of declassification:

> If you're wealthy, if you're white or black and you are powerful, and you know people, and you use the word, "I have a lawyer," and you don't want your child to be classified anymore, that's the only thing I can think. - *SpEdT1*

> Students that have the money and their family is well off. They seem to have academic support. Parents, they usually get like extra tutoring for the student. They make sure the students stay at the school. They don't have the household burden that some of these students have, whereas the students with the low economic standard when they come home some of them have to take care of their brothers and sisters, um, they help in the household. Some of them out there getting a job to help support the family. So they don't have the time at home, to do the academics as like somebody who family has money and let's do it and just come home and focus on academic to do well. So, economics plays a big factor and in education. - *SpEdT7*

Admin2 also introduced a discussion about families who receive financial assistance from social services and therefore may not want their child to be declassified. This perception situates a family's socioeconomic status with declassification as a means to an end. It is a perception that Admin1 also shares:

> Parents, however, they do get a financial break, you know, from Social Security when they have a child that has an IEP, which is also an interesting dynamic, you know. Which is another thing I believe leads parents not to want to declassify students as well. - *Admin1*

3.2.1.3 *Students' home life may influence declassification.*

Participants expressed that a students' home life may influence declassification. They specially cited that living in urban areas where students are exposed to bad examples of gangs, violence, and other negative influences influenced declassification. SpEdT6 expressed:

> But certainly, because our kids are in an urban setting with a lot of gang activity and affiliation and assumption. Those kids are looked at as non-compliant, easily agitated, emotional, violent, angry, and dangerous. And so, again, some that student is always going to have like a question mark as to why they should, you know, be with the general population. - *SpEdT6*

A student's home life should not be a factor in whether they are candidates for declassification if they have demonstrated that they can achieve academically without the mandated supports outlined in their IEP.

SpEdT7 felt that the perceived home life of Black students influenced whether a teacher recommended or advocated for declassification:

> Some of it has to do with race, and some of it, I believe, is the black students that they -the way they live their life and the way they, they do things kind of make teachers hesitant about, you know, recommending stuff like that for them because they not sure of like their culture. - *SpEdT7*

Additionally, GenEdT1 expressed that ENL students who receive special education services whose primary home language is not English are less likely to be declassified because they cannot practice at home due to socioeconomic implications. Further, GenEdT1 also adds that these students do not achieve because their families do not have a formal education.

> You know I have a student now she's been here for a number of years, but she doesn't speak one word of English. And that's because here, she gets other people to translate for her, and then she goes home, and they don't speak English either. So, you know, it's difficult. It's difficult when you're trying something here for however many hours of the day, but they still have to go home to what they're dealing with there, you know, and I think that's a big problem because the parents themselves aren't educated. -*GenEdT1*

3.3 School districts may influence declassification. Several participants expressed a perception that if the district could provide more support to students, they would not need to be classified. It was not clear how they came to this conclusion, as special education identification rates tend to be similar nationwide regardless of a given district's affluence. However, the comments were related more to the timely provision of services than non-classification or declassification per se.

Both SCouns1 and GenEdT1 expressed concern with the lack of supplies, tutoring options, and services for students in their school district.

> Resources always help. It can, I mean, could it not? If the school offered, you know, maybe, you know, tutoring options, or after school options or whatever, you know, a school could offer, I'm sure that might help if the student, you know, takes upon or even if the teacher could extend themselves more, you know, that might help. - *SCouns1*

GenEdT1 specifically notes that students with disabilities do not receive the services they need without adequate school funding and have less chance of being declassified.

> Well, I think it definitely does, but, like for instance, in this district, students don't have much as compared to another district like even supplies, we don't get supplies, we don't get certain things because we're always in debt, in this school district it's never ever ending here, all the years I've been here, and even I, I grew up in this school district, even when I was in school that's all you heard about was, you know, this school district's educational system was in debt. So, because they don't have the extras, because they don't have the kind of things that they need. I don't see them getting declassified. You know, I don't know if I answered that correctly, but I think it definitely has a lot to do with the district. I do think they don't necessarily get all the services that they actually need because there's no money. - *GenEdT1*

School districts procedures are delayed/backed up

SpEdC2 and SpEdT2 expressed a concern that the school district is backed up on many components of the special education process (i.e., evaluation, triennials, parental consent for services, scheduling and holding IEP meetings with all mandated participants) and that this in turn influences declassification:

> We know that it's overwhelming because of the information that we provide; their child may not receive an evaluation for sometimes up to three years. And so they may forget what we've told them, you know, and then the difficulty that we have in this school district, is we can submit a letter to the Committee on special education. But then the Board of Education is going to send out a packet of information to the parent, and which they have to, they have to sign consent for reopened for an evaluation, and sometimes the parents overlook

> that component. So we have to follow up on our end to say nothing can happen without your consent. So that delays the process. - *SpEdC2*

> So the triennials in this school district are actually pretty behind. And a lot of times, students are referred for an adjustment in their services in terms of, let's say, they're in our school, and when we think that they need to be placed in a more restrictive environment, there has to be a CSE meeting that's held at the board. Those should have psychologists, but again this school district is pretty behind in scheduling those meetings, so there, there are a lot of students who are waiting to have those reviews done that just haven't had it yet. -*SpEdT2*

School districts have a disincentive as they receive funding for the special education population

GenEdT3 expressed the perception that there is a lack of trust between families of color and the school district that may influence declassification. He expresses that these families do not believe that school systems and districts do not have their children's best interests in mind. Instead, he perceives that families of color believe that school districts view their children as "dollar signs" to secure funding. GenEdT3 acknowledges that school districts receive specific special education funding for students with disabilities, and focusing on declassification may present a conflict of financial interest.

> Specifically on the minority side, and I think that's probably one of the main reason why you know minorities may be a little bit more opposed to their kids in special ed because they don't believe that the system is actually there to, to help, but is there for the funding part and not specifically there to help. I know that there's funding that districts, to be honest, look for I'm not saying that this school district is one of those - my wife is also in education, so I know a lot of what's going on. I know a lot of districts depend on, depends on funding, and who knows, maybe there's, I think a factor could be because of funding issues if we take if we declassified students we may not get a specific amount of funding that we normally get. I would say that's probably a major factor, I would think. - *GenEdT3*

Research Question #2: CSE Members' Perceptions of Race and Ethnicity Influence Declassification

The findings suggest that CSE members' perceptions of race/ethnicity influence declassification. Some participants expressed that differences existed in how racial groups were treated and perceived. This section will provide an in-depth understanding of participants' varying perceptions of race and ethnicity and its capacity to influence students' declassification with disabilities.

Theme #1: CSE Members' Varying Perceptions of Race. Several participants expressed a perception that race manifests itself in education. These participants acknowledged that race afforded opportunities for some while limited those for others. Some participants, however, did not acknowledge race at all. Race, nonetheless, was expressed as an aspect that influences participants' personal and professional lives. Admin1 expressed his perceptions and experiences with race. Initially, he indicated that he attempted to eliminate race in his professional life but has grown to acknowledge that race is a critical aspect of his constituents' existence and experience in this country. He also goes on to express that a person's race is composed of their values, culture, and heritage:

> I try the best I can to take race out of the equation all the time. But when you do that, you actually insult people more than anything else. So, you know, I've learned over the years not to take it out, and, you know, identify it right away, and, you know, point out the elephant in the room, and have those conversations. And I think by doing that, I've actually gained the respect of more individuals. And parents are like, when, you know, instead of me saying, you know, oh, I don't see color. Look, I have to see color. Because if I don't see color, I don't see you. When I identify myself as a white Jewish male, you know, I think the reason I identify that way mostly is because that's where my values come from. So I think when you know, you talk about race, it really comes down to values of a culture are values of a specific, you know, individual or their heritage. - *Admin1*

Contrary to Admin1's growth in his perceptions of race, GenEdT1 expressed that race or racism are used as a tool against White people. This perception is a departure from the historical use of race by white people as a vehicle to exploit, discriminate, and deny the rights of citizens of color:

> Racism is, well, it's used a lot. Now, even when you're not a racist, just because of. I think it's kinda like the other way around. Now, it's used against you; if you're if you're White, if you're a female, if you're whatever else you are, it's used against you. I've had tons of instances where I've gotten called racist for no reason, and there was absolutely no justification for it at all. -*GenEdT1*

Admin5 expressed that she does not believe in race nor that it is important as she does not identify with any specific racial group

> I don't believe in it. So, it's people talk about it, but and I understand what they're talking about, but it's personally I don't have no belief in race as such. I don't believe it myself; like I said, even if I'm coming from an Asian subcontinent and I might not be considered White or Black or Latino, I can't even identify with any of them. It doesn't make any sense to me, and it's you know it's not. Personally, it's not important at all. -*Admin5*

Theme #2: Racial groups are treated differently. Several participants expressed a perception that some racial groups are viewed and treated differently than others. These views, or what participants described as stereotypes, influenced how they viewed, interacted, or thought about racial groups. Participants also expressed how their upbringing may influence their perceptions.

> Um, everybody likes to say they're not racist. And, you know, to the most part, they not, but I think stereotypes really play a factor into people's decision-making. Um, stereotypes, especially minorities, aren't very good. And when, when people of other race sees this going on. So they, they'll feel like, well, this is going to be that child, child outcome, like, one stereotype. They have, which is kind of a fact, but you know it's not proven, advocate on test on their fourth-grade state exam. If they turn out to be a "one" or "two" [*Level on State examination*] kids already, they're to be not going to graduate high school, probably end up in jail. They have this stereotype this perception

about. So this perception carries on with them throughout the whole process. And if you, if your parents is not involved, and your academics act like they don't care, like the teacher calls your house. Don't, um, they feel like your parents don't care about you, about how you doing, how you performing and stuff like that. Even though the parent might be busy or whatever, they do care, but they don't know how to help you. Also, mostly white students, you see, they get declassified more because they see that the parents are always there; they can contact them. They see they don't have any true negative stereotypes going on about them, so they see that these kids are going to do well. Whereas with minority students, you're not only fighting your stereotypes. You, you fight in peer pressure, because even if you live in a bad area. I don't want to be perceived as a certain way amongst your peers because you're trying to survive where you live that too. -*SpEdT7*

Similar to SpEdT7, GenEdT3 recognizes that people are treated differently based on their race. GenEdT3, however, seemingly expresses his belief that the fact that he is human should be enough to be given the respect that he deserves regardless of race:

> Look, look that deep into it. I think it's probably the way how I was raised. You know, folks are kind of raised. I think people's upbringing is more like, oh yes, I'm Black, White, Spanish, Asian or whatever, you know the way I was raised was, yes. First, I'm a human being, and yes, I'm Black but then before my, my race, you know, being Black, White, whatever. I consider myself to be a human being, but yes, I'm proud of who I am. If that's the question, but I really don't focus on that, to be honest with you. - *GenEdT3*

SpEdT3 discusses facilitating conversations with students about race relations. This special education teacher specifically speaks about the Black Lives Matter Movement and the subsequent protests of the multiple killings of unarmed Black men during 2020:

> I've been talking about this summer and the protests and everything all my students, and something that I once did say, was when I started it was like, no, all lives matter, and all this stuff, and that was something I said but being around my students. And hearing about their lives and getting to know them as human beings and the struggles they've been through, I see that that was wrong. And it's something that I communicate with my students all the time; it's like you are who you are, but you're more than just the color of your skin, you're human, you're humans, you have the ability to rise up and be

> successful, no matter what. And honestly, teaching in this school district and teaching the kids that I teach significantly changed the way that I view myself. Um, you know, that's something if you asked me five years ago before I started here, I have a completely different answer. But now, since most of all, they are Latino, they are, they are Black, I. My eyes have been opened to the ways of the world a little bit more, and honestly, it's really made me see. And again, it's tough to say sometimes, but how privileged I am to be White, and it's disgusting in my opinion that even exists. -*SpEdT3*

As evidenced above, SpEdT3 initially situated his stance communicating that "all lives matter" however, after conversing and learning with his students, he realized how racially divisive United States society can be/is and how this directly impacts students of color. Further, he speaks about personal introspection acknowledging race as a privilege, social construct, and property. Further, this introspection and its manifestation in the classroom supports DisCrit's tenet of diverse forms of activism and resistance against domination.

Theme #3: A variance of perceptions of families of color exist. Several participants expressed perceptions of families of color. Many described societal perceptions, those of their friends, families, and colleagues and their own if the district could provide more support to students, they would not need to be classified. Participants were very explicit about the perceptions of families of color, noting the African-American and Latinx communities. GenEdT4 expressed perceptions that the Latinx community trusts the educational system while White and Black communities are skeptical.

> When it comes to the Latin community, is all kinds of extremes right, we have the Puerto Ricans who have been here for generations. We have Mexicans down in Texas they've been here for generations from here in New York. You know you talk about the second generation, you know, kids. I think that I'm from what I, from what I seen in my experience, that like Mexicans, Latinos in general. They trust the system. I think they put a lot of faith in the system. You know, I think that if, you know, if you see a Mexican student like, I'm

> Guatemalan, you know, if they're not doing well in school if they're not, you know, or, or they're in a special effort they trust that they're the people to say yeah this is this is to choose, you know, whereas you get the White communities in the, you know, they're very skeptical. Are they doing everything they can for my son? Are they doing everything? What about this teacher, What about that teacher, you know. And I think, I think that the, I think the Black communities are very skeptical too. For the same reasons, you know, but yeah, so that's what that's what I think. I think the Hispanic communities more trusting of the system than anybody else. - *GenEdT4*

When describing perceptions of families of color, Admin1 states:

> Because they (families of color) feel the system has let them down, that they're gonna let the child down. And it's just Oh, whatever, Mr. Chairman, you know, five more years, and I'm done two or three more years, two more years, and we're done. So I think systematic problems, you know, as this country is seeing. - *Admin1*

SCouns1 expanded on Admin1's response, reflecting on her perceptions of trust in the school district as it relates to families of color:

> Ah, I think African Americans have the least amount of trust. Um, I just thought about something too. I think African American and Hispanic groups, I think they do not totally trust the schools, even if they know that their child may not perform as best they can. And a lot of times it's because of their experiences in school. So they do not trust the process because it may not have worked for them, or if they receive services, they were not happy with it. - *SCouns1*

Theme #4: Racial groups perceive special education differently. Participants expressed a perception that racial groups perceived special education differently. Many expressed that White families utilized special education services to benefit their children. Their view is that special education provides their children with services that will, in theory, increase the quality of their education and provide them with the skills necessary to be successful while families of color, on the other hand, take a deficit view to special education. They see this as another "system" that subjects their child to society's violence, and that puts their child on a "no exit" path in special

education. Participants expressed that perceptions of families of color about special education were rooted in stigma and further that these services, and the educational system as a whole, were not intended to benefit them. GenEdT3 expressed:

> I think minorities. I would say probably out of pride and not wanting their children to be associated with that. They're not looking that far, or more detail, and like, wow, this could actually help my son or daughter in a certain thing. They're not looking at it from that angle, and they're just looking at it and say, Wow, you have my child classified as special ed. While the Caucasian counterparts might say, yes, it's my child is classified as special ed, but you know what? I'm going to have more time here; she's going to have more time to do the SAT and so forth. You know, so there are certain things, and you know I get, I have a niece on my wife's side, who just graduated law school, but she's legally blind. And, you know, she's been given privileges for taking the bar where she's taken it in three days. So, you know folks who are in the know they know certain things and they will use things to their advantage……. On the other hand, the minority community looks at it differently. They do not have the funds to go help. Johnny or Mary, to get, you know, help on the weekends. Okay, and send them to Kumon (*standardized test preparation organization)* or whatever those programs are. And at the same time, they don't believe the system is actually set up for them for their kids to succeed. In that sense, so then it's really. They see it as a lose-lose for them, so why use my child to help you get something that's really not benefiting. – *GenEdT3*

Additionally, Admin 5 offered a unique perspective as an immigrant who traveled to the United States:

> Yet at the same time, I know what happened in our arguments with our folks in the building, when we had our, you know, we were talking about race and prejudice and all that, you have whole meetings and series of PLC's (*professional learning communities)* for that. It came to all the history. Yes, we should understand it. You should understand the cause of it, but we gotta, we gotta be able to come together to move on and make that difference. And whether it's special education or novice immigrant, whether you're black, white, green, I don't care. And this you have to do this for everybody. You live in this country, right, and you live in a society. You live not just in a country but even a society, your own community. Your school is also a community, so you do it, your neighborhood and, and that's, that's what gets me angry when the adults don't seem to want to move on and look forward to trying to change it rather than go back in history and pull that in. I understand. Yes, It takes a lot of things to happen. We can go back 2000 years, and we can go back 100 years, we can go keep going back to even 2030

> years - we cannot take that and want to try to change it. As a child, As I said, I didn't grow up in this country, so I didn't face the race and ethnicity differences or discrimination as a child on the way people in this country face. But in India, it's a little different. As I said, it's more because of a caste system. I do fall in a caste that is kind of privileged. But at the same time. I grew up in a school that was more of a community school where everybody was accepted, and everybody was part of that was never treated differently. No matter. And so, therefore, I didn't really face that as well. But I have seen it happen, you know, in India being not just a caste but also religion, you know between Hindus and Muslims, there is a lot of fights. There's a lot of, you know, terrorists and things and all that happening because of the religious background. -*Admin5*

Theme #5: Teacher racial bias about students exists and may influence the special education process. Several participants expressed a perception that teacher racial bias exists. Whether implicit or explicit, these biases, in some cases, influenced declassification and the special education process. Some participants suggested that perception existed that students of color could not perform academically in general education classrooms and consequently belonged in special education. It was also suggested that these biases played a role in why students of color remain in special education. SpEdT7 expressed:

> Well, I think they (CSE members) are more hesitant when it comes to minorities. Mainly because they're not familiar with that minority. And they're not. They're not quick too, um, get rid of that label for that student. Um, you know, it's not like trying to be racist about it. Still, race does play a factor in like with our self-contained kids, and having them move to resource is harder for a minority kid as compared to a White kid; I see that because I think with all the stereotypes about Black people. I think that plays a factor in, in, in the decision-making process. Um, White students do get declassified at a higher rate than Black students. - *SpEdT7*

Admin 2 added:

> I think when you're having people who have that unconsciousness about them, it ties it to race, and it goes into that they just may unconsciously feel that

> certain kids of certain races are just not able to move or be moved out. - *Admin2*

Similar to SpEdT7, both Admin2 and SpEdT6 expressed that a perception exists within the school district that situates students of color as incapable of performing academically, thus influencing the likelihood of declassification:

> I think the perception is that they're (students of color) just not able to perform. And it goes back down to, again, the biases or prejudices, the age range, the veteran teachers that are teaching it; they're just not socially adept. And they're not dealing with it? Again, cultural responsiveness. They're just not responsive. They haven't been attuned to the change in the culture; it's not just culture but the generational change; it's not just race culture. It's generational. They're just seeing that they're the ones that need special education. They need to get that barrier removed from them. Senior veteran teachers, the more senior veteran teacher wants it to be back in the day where the kids just were put in (special education) and expected to just continue to stay in forever. - *Admin2*

Further, SpEdT6 shared that this perception is rooted in a Eurocentric society.

> Unconsciously I believe that people believe that that's where (special education) African American students belong. I believe that when a number of our high-performing Gen ed students do well. Oh, he did well. Wow. How did you get that grade? How'd you, how'd you do that? It is; I think there's a perception that we (African Americans) are not as intelligent as the Eurocentric individuals that we work with and go to school with and everything else, so it is a surprise. -*SpEdT6*

Theme #6: Race may influence declassification. Several participants expressed that race influenced declassification. These participants suggested that the educational system, at large, was Eurocentric and, for this reason, did not meet the needs of or understand students of color. Further, participants expressed that unconscious bias about race influenced exit from special education. Those that did not express this perception suggested that race did not play a role in or influence

declassification. Further, they expressed what appeared to be a colorblind approach to their interaction with all students.

Admin4 recognized that race is a factor that influences declassification but expressed that it should not:

> I don't think race should play a part. And who gets what, what, you know, I think everybody should have a chance to get. - *Admin4*

Colorblind approach

While Admin4 recognized the role that race may play in decision making during the special education process, *GenEdT1* subscribes to the perception that race is not a factor:

> For me, I don't think that resonates whatsoever. I've never seen a student black, white, you know, brown, whatever. I've never seen anyone who really needs to get turned away just because of the color of their skin. - *GenEdT1*

Research Question #3: CSE Members' Perceptions of Ability Influence Declassification

The findings suggest that CSE members' shared similar definitions of ability. Despite these shared definitions, a variance existed in how CSE members perceived a student's abilities with disabilities and the purpose of special education. Participants' responses revealed an emphasis placed on mainstreaming within the school district and not on declassification. Further, participants indicated that students were placed in special education due to school-based support staff or parents' academic and behavioral concerns. While academic and behavioral concerns were the basis of why students are/were referred to special education, participants noted that barriers existed that prevent CSE members from accurately assessing students' ability. This section will provide an in-depth understanding of participant's varying perceptions of ability.

Theme #1: Variance exists in the purpose/goals of special education. Several participants expressed that students with disabilities should receive the same or a comparable education to general education students. However, the described education should be individualized and specific to particular students based on their learning needs. Other participants communicated that the purpose of special education was to develop independence and advocacy in students. Participants also suggested that the purpose of special education was to transition students out of high school to become contributing citizens.

Both Admin2 and GenEdT3 echoed the same perception that the goal of special education is for students with disabilities to receive an equitable education as their general education counterparts:

> The goal is to get the same education that all students get. - *Admin2*

> I would say it's equity right, making sure that they're able to receive the same level of education and have the same level of understanding of anyone who's not in special education. - *GenEdT3*

While both Admin2 and GenEdT3 referenced a comparable and equitable quality of education, SpEdT1 expressed that this concept is relative and specific to individual students:

> It's individualized depends on what their goals are. So, I mean that's, to me, that's a very broad question. Because I might have a student who is a senior and his IEP goal is for him to research his desired profession, and to actually have and be able to apply for that, where I might have a ninth-grader who has an IEP behavioral intervention plan where his goal is to sit in the class for 30 minutes without asking for a break so it's, you know, in IEP the first word is individualized. So I think it's very individualized and, which can really be beneficial because it should be really tailored to that specific person. The goal of special ed is, I think, just to go, to provide students with those skills that they don't have or that they need extra help with. -*SpEdT1*

SpEdT3 discussed that the purpose of special education for students with disabilities in high school is individual but should also focus on transitioning into the workforce and other post-secondary trade schools:

> For SWD's once you hit high school. It shouldn't be about getting the highest education or academic success possible, and it should be about like the transition out of high school. The ultimate goal is to ensure that they get the best education possible for them. As I mean, that's what we do with general ed, and you give them each and every opportunity to succeed through electives or clubs, or any other number of things in special ed. It might not be the elective class or the club, it might be using those reports or having extra help, or whatever, but the ultimate goal is to give them the best education that is available. Do you want to go to college, do you want to get a job, do you want to go to a trade school? Let's focus in on what you want to do and move forward. So that's my that's my personal goal in my classroom is, you leave my classroom, ready for life after high school. The goal for each one of my students is to leave my classroom with a diploma and be ready, not for college specifically but for the transition from high school to post-secondary. -*SpEdT3*

SpEdC2 added that the purpose of special education is to develop independence in students with disabilities that ends in a movement to lesser restrictive settings or declassification:

> The ultimate goal is for students to become independent, where they can be. They either can be declassified, or they're at the top of the pyramid where the receiving consultant, teacher, the consultant teacher model. - *SpEdC2*

Lastly, SpEdT6 saw the value in providing students with disabilities with the skills necessary to be successful:

> I believe the ultimate goal is to provide students with the strategies, tools, accommodations, and services that they require to be successful academically towards moving to their fullest individual potential. -*SpEdT6*

Theme #2: An emphasis on mainstreaming within the school district exists.

An overwhelming majority of participants expressed an emphasis on mainstreaming. Participants suggested that students should be mainstreamed into general education classrooms/settings as much as appropriately possible; however, there was limited

emphasis or exploration on declassification. SpEdC2 discussed a specific mainstreaming program in the school district:

> The consultant - there's two types - there's direct and indirect. This school district has different programs within special education. And so the consultant teachers at the top of the pyramid is the least restrictive in which students are functioning independently. And in the direct model. The teacher, usually a resource teacher but a certified special education teacher, pushes into a class in which the student exhibits academic challenges. So, for example, English or Math class. And they, they follow that student and support the student directly in the classroom, whereas the indirect student is, is 100% functioning on their own, and you monitor the student's progress through the academic teachers.- *SpEdC2*

Admin5 shared experiences that depict incremental movement across the special education continuum with access to general education courses but not declassification:

> We have, I have not reached the stage where they have been declassified completely, but we have reached an incremental stage where certain services have been discontinued or have been modified to where the student is targeted to go more to general education. They have not been completely declassified. -*Admin5*

SpEdT3 echoed a similar perception:

> Each student, each student, should be classified in place in the least restrictive environment. So my placement is 12 to one to 1. 12 students, one teacher, one aide. If they succeed at my level, they go to the next one, which is 15 to 1. 15 students and one teacher. If they succeed in 15 to one, then they become a resource student, which is all general ed classes with one period of resource, with a resource teacher five to one. So, if they make their way up that ladder and keep proving and proving and proving and proving, then, absolutely, even at the high school level, decent declassification would be an option and should be an option. Okay. But I think the tiers that we have different classifications are there just, just so we have enough evidence that we don't mistakenly declassify someone and have them struggle. If they can prove they can be a resource student who can get straight A's and 90s, then we should obviously approach declassification with their parents. -*SpEdT3*

Theme #3: Perceptions of the definition of Ability. Several participants expressed the perception that one's ability was their aptitude in performing academic

activities and tasks. Participants also expressed that an educator's ultimate task, job, and responsibility was to identify and harness students' ability to promote academic achievement and growth:

> Ability is just your cognitive ability to perform an academic activity. To have ability means you're able to do something. - *Admin2*

> An individual's capability, and any form. Whether it be educational or not. - *GenEdT1*

Admin3 expressed that all students have the ability but emphasized that it is the responsibility of teachers to uncover, magnify, and strengthen:

> I think that everybody has the ability. I think that, especially with kids, it's up to the adults to, to find each young person's ability and kind of work that ability. And if you're a teacher and you're not doing that, then you're not doing your job. -*Admin3*

Theme #4: Barriers exist that prevent educators from accurately assessing students' ability. Several participants expressed that the actual tool used to assess students' ability was a barrier in itself. Simply stated, participants did not feel the tools were accurate or reliable. Additionally, participants suggested that the district process for testing was outdated and backed up due to the number of requests for evaluation or reevaluation. Other participants suggested that overworked school psychologists, student attendance, familiarity with assessors, COVID-19, and available time were barriers to assessing students' ability accurately. SpEdT6 expressed a concern that the school district was significantly behind in testing. She listed lack of attendance at parent meetings, long assessments, student cooperation, and preparedness or lack thereof, and the quality of the assessment as barriers:

> Yes, testing, we are very much behind in our psychological testing. There are times when it's difficult to get a social history because it's difficult to get the parents who are available to sit down with a social worker. Sometimes the

> students are just not in the frame of mind. It's a pretty long test, and because the test starts off, so what's the word -infantile. The students are insulted. So they've come to me, and he said, I'm not stupid man, I'm not retarded, you know, they asked me this stupid question, and I said I know I said, they have to start very basic, And then it gets harder and harder and harder, but he cannot get insulted by the questions - *SpEdT6*

Many participants were not confident in the assessment tools used to assess student ability, determine eligibility for special education services, and continue or remove services. SpEdT2 expressed:

> The barrier that I see is the actual tool that we use. It is a written exam like the Scantron students do have difficulty just focusing and answering those specific questions. I just think that the test that in and of itself is doesn't lend itself to students actually paying attention and giving it their best effort. - *SpEdT2*

SpEdT7 also expressed that time is a barrier to accurately assessing students' ability:

> Most of the time, teachers that they don't have time to, you know, fully assess the child because they spend most, even though, you know, we do our annual review meetings and stuff like that. Um, we still have to teach our subject. So you focus on teaching your subject because of one thing about special ed. Even though they may get more time to test, they don't get more time to look to learn the subject matter. So, you still try to teach them the subject matter breaking it down to the end that's your main focus is on trying to get them to learn this material so that they can pass the Regents exam at the end of the year you feel pressed for time. Because if you don't have time to fully assess these students, then you don't know truly where they stand in, you're not going to want to declassify students and do things like that move them to move them up to at least a restrictive environment because you don't know what's really going on. Thank you. - *SpEdT7*

SpEdC2, Admin2 expressed that district-wide barriers exist that prevent the CSE from accurately assessing students' ability:

> I would say that the need and this public school system as a whole is great. You know we have over, over, I think is over 5000 students in this school district receiving services. And yet that doesn't that doesn't that number doesn't count the number of students that are waiting to be evaluated. So it's a high number. - *SpEdC2*

> So I think part of that is also the lack of full-time psychologists and therapists, OT, PT, social worker, psychologist, I think when schools are struggling with filling the void, my school has an I'm lucky I have a psychologist four days a week, I have a social worker, two days a week, I have OT, PT, as scheduled. So I may see the teacher once a week. Maybe, and they come in, they do their services, they bounce out, they're not even housed in my building. And I think that's a major concern. So these are the people who do the testing. I'm lucky I have psychologists four days a week; some have a psychologist one day a week. So I think when schools are struggling with filling those positions or funding those positions, the connection that the kids get toward moving them out (of special education) is lacking. - *Admin2*

Lastly, SpEdT1 referenced that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a barrier to accurately assessing students' ability due to remote learning and transitioning the special education processes and services to virtual platforms:

> Coronavirus. There's no way we're able to, and I can't test my students, we've not been. You asked before about the IEP meetings. We've had zero special ed department meetings this entire year. So I am at a loss for how am I assessing that we're supposed to assess students in the beginning of the year. And towards the end of the year, but I'm not able to do that. I've had zero guidance on how to go about doing that. There's just been no type of communication expectation. This is what should be done, so I don't know how to assess them for their IEP to understand their grade level. And I'm okay with that for my sophomores, juniors, and seniors who I've had before, but it's more challenging for the freshmen that come in because I still, it's really hard to gauge their ability to know what they are able to do without like a proper assessment. And let's be honest, I don't know how it is in your school but my school. I am not seeing a lot of effective, meaningful reciprocation of teachers and students in my special ed environment classes on a consistent daily basis. - *SpEdT1*

Theme #5: A variance exists in how CSE members view the abilities of SWD's. Several participants expressed a perception that CSE members do not believe students with disabilities can succeed academically. They suggested that CSE members and other educators view students with disabilities as lazy, less than, and cognitively limited. This perception was rooted in the stigma associated with the abilities of students who need and receive special education services. Other

participants, mainly special education teachers, believed that students with disabilities could be academically successful with the right support and interventions.

SpEdT3 and Admin3 echoed the perception that they believe students with disabilities can succeed academically:

> We all believe that they have. Everybody, everybody in special education has the ability to succeed in their own way. No matter what it is or how it is, or what classification. -*SpEdT3*

Admin3 echoed SpEdT3's perceptions; however, he furthered the discussion indicating that there are CSE members that do not believe that students can succeed academically:

> I think. I think that the majority of the staff that I deal with here think that their ability that, that there's a level of ability that where they can exceed and excel and move on and do really good things. But, but there, you know there's a small portion of individuals here that that may not feel that they may feel the need may feel that that special ed is destined for destiny for a few. Yeah, absolutely. For sure. -*Admin3*

In much the same way that Admin3 acknowledged that many CSE members did not believe students with disabilities could succeed academically, SCouns1 and GenEdT2 expressed the same perception:

> A lot of them feel that they can't do it. That they can't do it. - *SCouns1*

> Um, some of them don't think that they have the intellectual capacity. After some noxious things coming from them, and even I think the students internalize that too, they, they can feel it they can sense it internalize it they say it to themselves. So, some of them I think they do push the students, but there are some that who I sense, you know, are kind of that they can't handle this, they don't have the capability or they lower the bar, they just lower the bar all the time. Um, I don't know if some of my colleagues, trying to think of the best way to say this. Um, I think that it possibly can have some colleagues that who see students, a certain way, might deem dumb. Some colleagues might perceive a certain image of the student and continue to perceive that certain image because they came from here, or because you know maybe this is missing in their life, or maybe because they don't have this, you know, they

> still are struggling they might not be able to handle mainstream classes you know those things. - *GenEdT2*

SpEdT2 went on to express that the stigma of special education held by CSE members influences their perceptions of the abilities of students with disabilities:

> Again, it comes with that stigma that they receive special education services, there's this thought process that students who receive special education services, who have IEPS are in some way less than. I think too highly of my students, they don't (other CSE members), that's clear. -*SpEdT2*

SpEdT6 went on to state:

> Well, they're certainly microaggressions between the educators and the students, in terms of the way that they see the students, the way they see the students in special ed. And, you know, the first time I heard the word "subs." A student taught me what that was. He said, I'm not gonna go in a class with that lady, and I said, why so? Because she be throwing subs, and she don't think I understand what she's saying. And I said, what does that mean, and he said, subliminal messages she thinks she's talking over my head, but she doesn't understand that I'm deeper than that and I know what she's saying. I was like, Oh my God. And, of course, I fell in love with this kid. Um, somehow. People who think that our students are not intelligent are not aware. So they make these comments. Students are really locked into their responses, and they don't have a lot of control. So they are always left to be make bad decisions, take a risk. And that happens quite a bit. - *SpEdT6*

This perception is critical to unpack because it sheds light on how teachers' perceptions of students' ability or lack of disabilities influence how they interact and treat them.

Theme #6: Academic and behavioral achievement may influence declassification. Several participants expressed a perception that a student's academic and behavioral achievement influenced declassification. If a student "behaved" or demonstrated achievement in school, they were more likely to be declassified than students that did not. It was also suggested that male students often displayed "adverse" behavior as perceived by school staff and were more likely to remain in

special education than females. Lastly, some participants expressed that grade level may influence declassification in that upper-level high school students were less likely to be declassified.

A majority of participants conveyed that academic achievement influenced declassification, as seen in the following responses:

> I guess if you were thriving academically, you no longer needed that support in the resource classroom. I think that's what's really important, consistency and a type of, you know, a gradual increase in ability and a decrease in the need for those supports. - *SpEdT1*

> I think students should be declassified based upon their academic progress. I'm thinking of students I just I think once students begin to actually take their school, like take their assignments, complete them ask for assistance, and they're able to self-advocate and are making academic progress based on goals and that are set with them. And I think they should then be slowly move towards the process of declassification. But I also think that it has to be a conversation with the student. Um, I think student voices are lost a lot of times. It's more of, okay I don't think he can handle this, I don't think he can handle this, where I'm being a student advocate looking at student progress, looking where they started, looking where they are, looking at what the standards are, what they would be expected to meet actually doing a thorough analysis, in order to see whether or not, they'd be able to succeed. - *SpEdT2*

SpEdT3 added:

> Academic success. Behavioral success and being able to mentally handle. So if the student is meeting their academic goals, via the IEP the behavioral goals or social-emotional goals if they achieve each one of them, then that's definitely a case. There should be a case for declassification because you have evidence that can support that peer. - *SpEdT3*

While most participants indicated that a student's academic achievement should ultimately determine declassification, many participants expressed concern that behavior was more often than not a deciding factor. SpEdT2 expressed:

> I do think a big factor is again behavior. Students are instead of being based on academic ability academic progress academic potential. They are judged based on their behavior, on them. Behavior is this cultural, almost straight side things that are seen as acceptable to certain teachers. It's just like this child is

being self; she's being herself. This is just what she's used to. Give her a chance to be herself and let her learn. Still is she going to listen to the teacher? Is she going to talk back? And there is no - there's a cultural clash in terms of how students should act in a classroom. That that leads to them being left in the special education system. -*SpEdT2*

Many participants expressed the concern that special education is predominantly composed of male students:

> What's interesting is most males are referred. And so, we will have to look at that the reason why. So as I said early in the beginning, behavior is one of the first reasons. - *SpEdC2*

> I think that I find myself surrounded by boys. But at the end of the day, I was like, and it's just me and the boys again because they are, they tend to be I feel like boys are, you know, putting such like, much more than a female, because they are just rambunctious in general. And I think that we want boys to be able to sit for a long period of time, but I don't think that they can. And so I think that there could be accommodations in a general ed classroom, but I don't think that means teachers, to you know, that they have the understanding of how to do that. So that I think can become very overwhelming in a one to 30 situations. And you can, you can take that one kid out, the rest of the class will flow more smoothly. But so that's, I think, why that's boys are pushed out. And especially, like more I, that's like, I think that boys tend to be drawn into special ed way more than girls. Girls, I think when they have ADHD, for instance, they don't show it the same way as boys, right girls have any, you're more likely to have like high anxiety, whereas boys are, you know, they have high energy, you know, or, or maybe depression depends on how it comes out to them. Right. So I guess, I guess that and with males who are rambunctious, they tend to push them into special ed if they can. - *SpEdT4*

SpEdT1 went on to discuss that males of color end up referred to and the recipients of special education services due to a Eurocentric interpretation and perception of their behavior:

> Isn't our education system Eurocentric? So most of the special ed students are not European with that's my opinion at least, where you have historically European students who are white, and who you know socially might be more okay with sitting still in a classroom, being, you know, listening to a teacher, not sitting or sitting still and not being as talkative where from my experience on my other students who are, you know, Hispanic or Latino or black, they're a little bit more, and this isn't everybody. Still, I think there's a disconnect with cultural culturally, how, if you were to look at different societies around the

> world, I think if you look at students who, if you were to bring a cohort of kids from Kentucky and bring them out to Japan. Right, would they be labeled as special ed because maybe they don't fit into that whole expectations? So I think the educational expectations are extremely racist and outdated. - *SpEdT1*

SpEdT4 adds that families receive clinical recommendations that end in special education services or medication when teachers cannot effectively manage these interpreted behaviors.

> Okay, two reasons, I think behavior issues that could be remedied in a general classroom. So I find myself surrounded by a lot of boys. And I think that boys have to be boys. But sometimes, there are parents and teachers who feel like they can't handle a boy who's bouncing off the wall. So they're going to say that this is a kid and medicated or accommodations, they really have you. - *SpEdT4*

Theme #7: Students are placed in special education due to academic and behavioral concerns. Several participants expressed a perception that students are placed in special education due to academic and behavioral concerns. In many instances, teachers/school staff made recommendations for evaluation to determine special education eligibility. These recommendations were based on teacher observations and perceptions and emerged due to gaps in a student's capacity or ability to demonstrate mastery of grade/subject level standards. Participants also strongly expressed that students were placed in special education due to behavior concerns.

An overwhelming majority of participants expressed that students were placed in special education due to behavioral concerns. GendEdT1 and SpEdC2 communicated:

> Well, the obvious answer is because they have disabilities that interfere with their learning. - *GenEdT1*

> For the most part, what I've seen or experienced over the over 18 years in this school district, is that when students have exhibit behavioral issues. That's the first step to referring a child to special education. So it boils down to classroom management. Now, there may be some academic challenges. Also, but as soon as their behavior is exhibited, then the process stopped. - *SpEdC2*

As it relates to behavior, Admin2 expressed a disconnect between teacher expectations of student behavior and those that they actually demonstrate that lands them in special education:

> I think primarily behavioral issues that teachers are experiencing with the students. Initially, I think that's most referrals are a conflict between the behaviors exhibited and the behaviors desired by teachers. And the way we address behavioral issues as building as both as an assistant principal and the principal, various buildings, is working with the family and working with the child versus saying, Okay, we got to go to special education, we have to go to referral, that I usually leave more in the hands of the teacher, the one you know, that relationship. - *Admin2*

SpEdT1 added that sometimes these behavioral concerns occurred during elementary school years, and while they no longer demonstrate these behaviors, it continued to follow them to high school:

> So many I've seen in this school district is I get a handful of kids every single year. I'm like why is this kid in special ed? And through building a rapport with them, they will tell me that when they were younger, you know, they would throw their chairs in classes, or they would be, you know, it seemed like a lot of students in this school district at an early age if they had behavioral problems. - *SpEdT1*

Admin1 went on to discuss that often students' behavior begins to impede their capacity to learn:

> Well, I think that you know, there are a couple of reasons. One, a child usually gets placed in special education because, you know, a teacher notices a behavior problem or a learning problem. I think sometimes the behavior problem gets in the way of the learning problem. - *Admin1*

Research Question #4: CSE Members' Race/Ethnicity Influence Declassification

The findings reveal that CSE members had different perceptions of race-based on their backgrounds. They articulated that being a part of a racial group had defining characteristics and suggested that differences exist in how they perceive and experience race. CSE members shared mixed experiences of how/if race played a role in how their colleagues viewed them. Lastly, the findings suggested that female, White, and Christian ideals may influence declassification. This section will provide an in-depth understanding of how participant's ethnicity influences their perceptions about declassification.

Theme #1: Among CSE members, different perceptions of the definition of race exist. Several participants expressed different perceptions of race. Some identified race as to where you grew up and how you were raised, while others expressed that it was primarily one's skin color and how one identified. Participants also expressed that race meant the absence, existence, or abundance of opportunity. Admin5, an Asian-American female articulated:

> Well, race means typically to identify yourself in a certain category or certain background or certain color skin or certain caste system as we have in India which is also we would consider that. -*Admin5*

SpEdT6, GenEdT2, SCouns1, all African-American females expressed:

> Race means the color of my skin race means my historical background, my ethnicity. Where I come from what I relate to. I could go on and on and on. -*SpEdT6*

> It's just who I am. It's how I go out into the world every day. It's how I interact with people. It's how I interact with students. I mean, me who I am, um, it's just, it's just, it's just one. Just one big thing. Okay. Everything, everything connects, everything connects. - *SCouns1*

> Oh, well. Ah, yes, it's your background is like what kind of makes you who you are, where you came from, um, I want to say that is more than color but I feel like sometimes it is just color. For a lot of people. - *GenEdT2*

Several participants situated their perceptions about race around the events in 2020 that led to nationwide protests. SCouns1 expressed:

> In 2020 honestly, (race means) drama, you know, conflict to come in conflict. - *SCouns1*

Admin4 responded:

> Means (race) a lot to me because in this society, you know, everything is, is, is almost according to race- *Admin4*

SpEdC2 emphasized the perception that race afforded opportunities to some and excluded them for others:

> Race means opportunity. You know we sometimes we always say in our buildings sometimes, you know, do you have the complexion for the protection. And so, it means. Are you going to be given that opportunity or not? Are you going to be looked upon differently because of your race? Are you going to receive the same support as everyone else? Are you going to be treated? Are you going to be treated the same, or are you going to be treated differently? - *SpEdC2*

Theme #2: Being part of a racial group has defining characteristics.

Participants expressed that being a part of a specific racial group had defining characteristics. Black/African-American participants suggested that being a part of this racial group had positive connotations with descriptors such as perseverance, innovation, and pride. Black/African-American participants expressed that race was a social construct and an indicator of how they would be treated and what they would have access. White participants suggested that being a part of their racial group required reflection on positionality in this day and age. White participants also expressed that race meant nothing.

When asked what their race means to them, Black/African-American participants responded:

> Caregiver, a friend, a sister, mother, you know, on and means a lot of different things. I mean, I don't. I don't think I've worked. I mean, I, I am an African American woman. But I don't wake up every day and say, Oh, you know, I'm black. It's just who I am. Um, I don't think about it all the time. I guess maybe it's just something you accept. And when you go out into the world, you kind of prepare yourself for anything that could happen. But I, as I could say, in my building when I come to work, I also realized that a lot of my students, especially the minority students, they may not encounter someone like them. while they're in school, so I definitely try to do what's best for them. Do what's best for them help them maneuver through this high school system because a lot of times, it's not easy. - *SCouns1*
>
> My race means preservation plus, perseverance accomplishments, innovation, and temperament achievement. Pride. - *SpEdT6*
>
> Um, to me, I know we are high achievers. We, we usually have less, but we always end up doing well, we survivors. To me, we're the best race because people always try to put us down and keep us down. But we always managed to rise to the top. - *SpEdT7*
>
> Um, is pride. I, you know, like, now I'm at a point in my life where I feel that this pride and, you know, proud of who I am, maybe that wasn't what I felt earlier, but I definitely feel pride now for being with my race and ethnicity. Yeah. - *GenEdT2*
>
> Um, to me, it's a source of pride. It is actually within the school where I teach in schools who have been teaching; it's something that I can use to help empower my students. This is where I am. I look just like you can tell me I'm like the other teacher who doesn't care like it's a form of connection it's form community. Thank you for that. -*SpEdT2*
>
> You know, black, we know we consider ourselves African American, but in reality, we just black Americans. As you know, I hate to say it like this but really don't have too many ties to Africa because unless you trace your history or something like that. You don't know what African country you're part of, so just saying that you know you African American, you from Africa. That's a big continent. So, to me, you're a black American, and that's a good thing. And, you know, other people, other ethnicities, they see, they like Lee had that home country where they can associate with. So, they, they identify with that, and that would be their race, their back. -*SpEdT7*

Um, I guess I think as a black woman you kind of always have to take into consideration how you present your information, how you present your advocacy so that you don't come across as the angry black woman trope, so there's, there's the, um, I do weigh my words out in my head. Regardless of whom I'm speaking with, you know I clear it out first and see how is this gonna sound. How should how are they going to take it and just know that there is a lens through which people are seeing me and try to combat that as best I can? -*SpEdT2*

It's a social construct that we are forced to, you know, live with and, you know, our struggles that come along with being black. And it's it's a…I find the words; it's a burden of proving yourself at all times. Based on something that was socially constructed. -*SpEdT2*

It means everything. Race to me means how society feels; you raised me how you view yourself. Race means how you separate yourself from society's negativity. Race means how, you know, how you can do what you want with your race and either shame society or give society something to talk about. So for me, race is not just a black and white - race is a vocab race; the acronym race is a choice. Now when I say race is a choice, it is not so much in choice, but I can choose to be white tomorrow. What race is a choice in the sense of you know I'm black, but everybody don't have to have to constantly say, oh, black people ABC and D like how can I separate myself from past society. See me, you know, so, yeah. - *SpEdT5*

When asked what their race means to them, participants that identified as White/Caucasian responded,

It means that my heritage is from Europe, and my family came here, settled. It means that I should be reflective of who I am and how I interact with people. - *Admin3*

Nothing. Okay. It means nothing. And I just gave you the reason why. Because I look at every single human being. As one of my brothers or sisters because I believe we are all God's children. We're all just different, just the way my kids are here, but each and everyone so special and unique. And I believe that if we look hard enough deep down inside. Sometimes it's a little harder than others, but there is so much good inside of each and every one of us, and it's our responsibility to pull that out. - *SpEdC1*

You know, I mean I have a little one at home. And I just want him. I hopefully, you know, want to raise him that you know all people are people. Everyone, you know, everyone is should be treated the same no matter of color, race, sex, whatever your religious background is, I mean, my parents raised me, so I want to do the same thing for my [son's name]. - *SpEdC3*

> So, therefore, I was, you know, part of the problem and part of the system. And I had to do a lot of learning and a lot of, you know, understanding of what that really meant. And I think by doing that, I've actually gained the respect of more individuals. And parents are like, when, you know, instead of me saying, you know, oh, I don't see color. Look, I have to see color. Because if I don't see color, I don't see you. So, therefore, you know, I think parents, you know, you know, you know, they respect that more, you know, and this past summer, even I read a phenomenal book, you know, called White Privilege. Um, and no, it's not in the book White Fragility, White Fragility, thank you, White Fragility. You know, I'll be very honest with you. I never really thought of being completely honest. You know, I never thought of anything about it until I started working in an inner-city school. - *Admin1*

Theme #3: Differences may exist in how racial groups perceive or experience race. Participant responses suggested that there is a difference in how racial groups experience and perceive race. Several participants expressed a perception that being a part of a specific racial group afforded opportunities and privileges that other groups do not have access. Participants expressed their experiences with being in a particular racial group and how it has impacted their personal and professional lives.

SpEdT1, a white male, discussed the differences in how he and his students of color experience race:

> Being white means luck and privilege. Well, because I know I've had advantages that you probably haven't, and I mean everything that's transpired over the past ten years is a microcosm for what's happened for generations; it's just now everything is filmed. And I've had conversations with countless students who would tell me that they were being followed home by police officers who are good kids for no reason. And now that I'm a father, I just couldn't imagine talking to my kid about how to interact with an officer or how not to do certain things, which is such like a weird concept for me because I've never had those experiences. If I was, I was black, I feel like with something bad would happen, which is so horrible to think that just because our skin color is different, we're treated differently, but because of years and centuries of, you know, racial bias in built into our society, I mean our country was formed on slavery, the cotton trade and, you know, it's just all so fucking crazy, but that's you know where we are in a time right now, and now it's. I don't know it's. It is. It is wild. It is wild. - *SpEdT1*

SpEdT4, a mixed Arab-American female, discussed how people incorrectly perceive her as white and how this allows her to experience how others view Muslims:

> You know, I struggled with it when I was younger. But now, as an adult, I realize how awesome it is to be mixed Arab. You can see that I am a white blonde person. And usually, when people see me, they don't know that I'm very that my father is Muslim. And so people have some really crazy things, not realizing like who I am. So I guess people look at me as like a very innocent, white female. - *SpEdT4*

Like SpEdT4, SpEdT2 also experienced colleagues perceiving her as white and revealing their perceptions of people of color.

> Um. For me, the thing in this school district is, there are a lot of White teachers who often forget that I am not White. And so there's having a conversation with one teacher, and she was saying how she begins her husband about where they live now, and he goes well, he said that they start moving in, we have to know. And I'm like, Who did you think you were talking to, so it's it's, Um. -*SpEdT2*

SpEdT1, a white male, expressed that he had never personally been treated differently because of his race:

> I would have to dig really deep, but I don't think - I've always considered myself a chameleon where I can mix with anybody. So, I have not had any traumatic experiences at all. I felt very comfortable walking through the South Bronx. I used to date a girl we'd go to Caribbean night. I've worked in Flushing, where if you've never been to Flushing. Yes. That's the only place in America where I was like, I am that this is not feel like, you know, but again, I never had any, you know, I guess I'm very, very lucky. - *SpEdT1*

GenEdT1 echoed a similar sentiment:

> I really haven't had any experiences where someone treated me differently because I was white. - *GenEdT1*

Admin1, a white male, offered a perspective that his race often plays a role in how parents and students perceive him:

> Seeing how I got blamed by a lot of parents because I was a white male so therefore I was part of the problem and part of the system. And I had to do a lot of learning and a lot of understanding of what that really meant. I

> continued to try to understand where my students come from, their parents, and their perceptions. I will never fully understand it because I don't walk their shoes, and I don't live their lives. - *Admin1*

He went on to reference Robin DiAngelo's book, White Fragility, as critical in developing his understanding of positionality and privilege in the United States:

> That book (White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo) was just groundbreaking earth-shattering book that, as I read it, I was like, wow, I was like everybody thinks of that term white privilege, when you first hear it, that we're, you know, we're rich, we're wealthy, you know, different things. That's not what the book talks about, and it talks about just the fact that, you know, you and I walk down the street, I can expect not to be harassed. You, on the other hand, unfortunately, you know, that's the privilege I have. Um, so reading that was, you know, very, you know, opening, you know, and, you know, just telling about, you know, that helped me understand a lot more about why, you know, parents sometimes look at me differently, so I continue to read and try to educate myself when it comes to that. - *Admin1*

SpEdC1, a white female, discussed a perception that race played a role in how she was viewed and whether she would be able to work in a school district composed of students of color:

> I had a story that I used to tell about when I went to college when I went to go back to school. And the woman who interviewed me was very hoity-toity, and she said to me after I'd been accepted to the program, said I don't think this school is for you, looking down on me, and I said no, it is for me. I'm coming, I'm involved, and here I am. So, um, that was, you know, it made me feel terrible that somebody did that to me. So I would share the kids all the time. You don't know who I am I don't know who you are. And the whole point is that we have to know each other. You can't look at me and make assumptions about me, just the way I can't look at you and make assumptions about you. I am here because I choose to be here because I want to be here, and whether we look the same or not. I'm here to help you, and you're going to help me. And we're gonna learn together. And there we go back to William Glasser building those relationships, giving kids power in the classroom, having fun, and making them laugh. All of those things are priceless. And once that's accomplished, everything else comes naturally. Everything else falls into place. Whatever we didn't, whatever I don't know, I said we'll learn together, and it'll even be that much richer of an experience. So, does it necessity play a role or your race it does, but sometimes it works both ways. - *SpEdC1*

Admin 4, an African-American female, went on to discuss how she experienced race:

> When I first went to this High School, it's always been a Caucasian principal, and there was a Black woman coming in, and you know I was told I wasn't gonna last a year. Okay. Anything that they thought that I sent out that they thought was a mistake, they would take it and post a memo of going to public schools. Okay. Right in the teachers' room. So anything that they thought that I did, they would post it up, and all. And then they tried to find someone for a union rep, I guess. I had a nice union representative and worked with me and tried to find someone for you, and you bet didn't work out, and they were mad because I hired some African American teachers like I had an African American math teacher, and I had another African American teacher, and they thought that the superintendent should not have appointed me they are oh she won't last. You know, and I did last over there. I was over there for seven years, and I did turn the school around. - *Admin4*

Theme #4: Mixed experiences of how the role race plays in how participants are viewed. There were mixed experiences of how the role race played in how participants were viewed by other school staff or CSE members. Some participants expressed that their competence and dedication to students trumped race in how they were viewed:

> They see that, that, that I'm caring, I'm compassionate, and that I will fight for all students regardless of race. I believe everyone you know has the ability to achieve. And so, I feel supported in that area too, when caring for the students. But the parents in our district, we have to support both. I don't think so. I don't think so. Okay. And I never I never looked at that, you know, to say that it has. Okay. - *SpEdC2*

> Well, given that I'm knowledgeable in my field. And I have good relationships with the students. They do trust my judgment. So when I advocate for something, they usually go for it. Because they know I'm doing it for the best interest of the student. So, I don't think it's more of a race thing. I think, you know, they, they feel comfortable, and my decision making, because they know who I am as a person. But I do advocate, you know, for our minority students. And they, and they'll go with it because they are. - S*pEdT7*

GenEdT4 added:

> I don't think they take my race, independent, and say, well, this guy, you know he's Hispanic, so you probably not gonna do it negative negatively, you know what I mean, I think, I don't think it plays a role at all. I think they like to have me there, you know, for the meetings. But I don't think they say, let's just get

> him because, you know, he won't talk too much, or he won't say this or, you know, he'll agree with everything. I don't think I don't think that's going on. - *GenEdT4*

Others expressed that race has played a role in how their colleagues and other CSE members perceived them:

> I know when I had first started, in the schools, I encountered I mean, encountered parents that may not thought that I knew what I was talking about or if I could help their child because they thought I was Black. - *SCouns1*

Admin3 added,

> I think, firstly, you know, they could look at me and say, you know, but maybe he doesn't understand, you know, students of color. - *Admin3*

When asked the extent to which, it at all, race plays a role in how CSE members perceive their ability to advocate for students, participants responded:

> For me to say no would be foolish? You know, obviously, yes, it definitely plays a role because, again, you know, it's not something I can hide, you know, I am, who I am, you know, you can't hide who you are. Um, so, again, I think, unfortunately, that when parents come in, and they, you know, they feel so defeated by the system again. I'm, you know, as the White male in that meeting, they feel that, oh, there's the system, there's the problem again, um, so it does, you know, taint the way that, you know, some parents do approach those meetings, as I just said, in the previous, you know, response 90% of my, you know, annual review committee, you know, are White females, it just happens to be the way it is, you know, and I can see that definitely playing, you know, apart, you know, whether it is something that parents notice right away plays a part into it, or if it's just something that, you know, subconsciously that the parents are, you know, becoming a little more defensive or something else, and not knowing it. I 100% think it plays a part. - *Admin1*

Summary of Findings

Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from the data collected in this qualitative phenomenological research study. The key findings of this study were organized by research question. The data collected using in-depth semi-structured

virtual interviews revealed the essence of CSE members' lived experiences in an urban school district. The analysis of the data suggests that the perceptions/attitudes of CSE members about race and ability influence decision-making and declassification during the special education process. The study findings suggest a relationship between CSE members' perceptions of race and ability and declassification in this school district. It also suggests that differences exist in the role race plays in how their colleagues view participants.

The first research question in this study investigated CSE members' perceptions toward declassification. The analysis of the data found that CSE members' perceptions of declassification were mixed. Some participants were proponents or opponents of declassification in general, and there were others whose perceptions were dependent upon the individual student. Some participants noted that declassification was only considered when students were high achieving. Overall, most indicated that it was a rare occurrence. The analysis of collected data also suggests that multiple factors influenced declassification. Participants perceived that (a) CSE members may influence declassification, (b) students may influence declassification, and (c) school districts may influence declassification.

The second research question in this study investigated how, if at all, CSE members' perceptions about race influence declassification. The analysis of the data found that CSE members' perceptions of race and ethnicity influence declassification. Many participants expressed that their perception of race influenced their personal and professional lives. Participants also had perceptions of families of color that influenced how they thought and interacted with students and families. Participants

had varying perceptions that racial groups were treated and perceived differently within the workplace and society. Another perception was that racial groups had varying perspectives of special education. Participants also revealed that teacher bias about students existed within the school district and influenced decision-making during the special education process.

The third research question in this study investigated how, if at all, CSE members' perceptions about ability influence declassification. The findings suggest that CSE members' shared similar definitions of ability. Despite these shared definitions, a variance existed in how CSE members perceived a student's abilities with disabilities and the purpose of special education. Participants' responses revealed an emphasis placed on mainstreaming within the school district and not on declassification. Further, participants indicated that students were placed in special education due to school-based support staff or parents' academic and behavioral concerns. While academic and behavioral concerns were the basis of why students are/were referred to special education, participants noted that barriers existed that prevent CSE members from accurately assessing students' ability. The researcher identified seven overarching themes; (a) a variance exists in the purpose/goals of special education, (b) an emphasis on mainstreaming exists, (c) variance of the perceptions of the definition of ability exists, many of which are rooted in the stigma of special education, (d) barriers may exist that prevent educators from accurately assessing students' ability (e) a variance exists in how CSE members view the abilities SWD's, and (f) academic and behavioral achievement may influence

declassification including grade level and (g) students are placed in special education due to academic and behavioral concerns.

The fourth research question in this study investigated ways in which, if at all, the ethnicity of participants influences their perceptions/attitudes about declassification. The researcher found five overarching themes; (a) among CSE members, different perceptions of the definition of race exist, (b) being part of a racial group has defining characteristics, (c) differences exist in how racial groups perceive or experience race, and (e) mixed experiences exist in the role race plays in how participants are viewed. The findings reveal that CSE members had different perceptions of race based on their backgrounds. They articulated that being a part of a racial group had defining characteristics and suggested that differences exist in how they perceive and experience race. CSE members shared mixed experiences of how/if race played a role in how their colleagues viewed them. Lastly, the findings suggested that female, White, and Christian ideals may influence declassification.

In Chapter 5, the researcher will explore the meaning behind the perceptions and statements made by participants. The researcher will present analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the main findings and conclusions, and recommendations for how CSE and other educational stakeholders may address ableism and racism in declassification and the special education process.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee on special education (CSE) and the subcommittee of special education (SCSE) about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. The study sought to uncover whether a relationship exists between perceptions of race and ability and the disproportionate declassification rates in urban school districts. The researcher collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews with the intent of answering the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education toward declassification?
2. How, if at all, do the perceptions/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about race influence declassification?
3. How, if at all, do the perception/attitudes of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education about ability influence declassification?
4. In what ways does the ethnicity of members of the committee and subcommittee of special education influence their perceptions/attitudes about declassification?

This study identified several themes that emerged from the data that highlighted the perceptions/attitudes of CSE members and the factors that influence

declassification. The findings suggest that the perceptions/attitudes of CSE members about race and ability influence decision-making and declassification during the special education process. The study suggests a relationship between race and ability perceptions and the disproportionate declassification rates in urban school districts.

This chapter includes a discussion and interpretation of the major findings and how these findings connect to the theoretical framework of Connor et al. (2016) Dis/ability Critical Race Studies in Education (DisCrit) coupled with the conceptual framework of Ladson-Billings' (2007) educational debt concept. DisCrit scholars emphasize how the intersectionality of race and ableism is used to marginalize specific members of society. They also accentuate that individuals are valued for their multi-dimensional identities, not just by race, class, or gender. Moreover, DisCrit highlights the significance of the concept that race and disability are socially constructed. DisCrit seeks to value, honor, and amplify voices. DisCrit acknowledges that race and ability have been used in tandem to deny individuals' rights and that race and ability are property for specific populations. Lastly, DisCrit calls for activism and resistance against domination, marginalization, and notions of normalcy.

The chapter discusses the implications of the findings; it concludes with a look at the limitations of this study and a discussion of future research and practice recommendations to educational stakeholders and scholarship communities for consideration, replication, and possible future implementation.

Implications of Findings

As discussed earlier, Ladson-Billings (2007) offered a comprehensive analysis of the state of education in the United States. She argues that a focus on the national

achievement gap (disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrant and White students) is misplaced. Instead, she urges that we must focus on what she coins and identifies as the four forms of educational debt that have accumulated over time—economic, historical, sociopolitical, and moral (Ladson-Billings, 2007) that negatively impact students of color. This conceptual framework provides a lens to examine these interrelated debts that students of color have inherited due to living in a country founded on slavery and the violence of colonialism that influences all aspects of day-to-day life. The conceptual framework of the educational debt provides the lens for the theoretical framework DisCrit.

Research Question #1

The first research question in this study investigated the perceptions of CSE members toward declassification. The researcher identified three overarching themes; (a) mixed perceptions of and attitudes toward declassification exist, (b) declassification is rare, (c) multiple factors may influence declassification. The researcher did not find any prior research that spoke to educators' varying motives and perspectives toward declassification. The present study revealed new information about the diversity of viewpoints. It is noted that IDEA (2004) does not provide any particular guidance for declassification (Dragoo & McLaughlin, 2013).

In the first theme, some participants were proponents and opponents of declassification, and others articulated that their perception was dependent upon individual students. For example, in the current study, SpEdC3 and Admin4, who were proponents of declassification, expressed that students may experience greater

self-esteem and a sense of achievement. While both participants discussed ways in which declassification might positively impact students (i.e., increased confidence and social-emotional well-being), they also revealed their perception that the stigma of special education can have a negative effect on students with disabilities. These effects might manifest themselves in how students with disabilities view themselves and the services that they receive and how others (family, classmates, friends, educational stakeholders) view or perceive them. The responses further evoke discussion about why students with disabilities have a negative perception of receiving special education services, what attributes this sentiment, and how educational stakeholders can address it. The feelings of these students and community members and its subsequent manifestation in education support the tenet of DisCrit that purports that ableism works covertly to marginalize and shape normalcy. Further, and perhaps, more importantly, the stigma of special education that these students experience is rooted in ableism and "results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that disability inherently means deficiency" (Hehir, 2015, p.3)

The opponents thought that necessary supports might be removed, leading to the possibility of a future failure. The participants generally did not back their perceptions with any knowledge of research or outcomes for their students and seemed to be guided by their belief systems. For example, Admin4, an opponent of declassification, suggested that students' chances of success in the post-secondary environment would be enhanced if they were declassified. While in theory, not having an IEP may enable you to have direct access to the general education curriculum and, in turn, a more academically rigorous, robust, and comprehensive

educational experience, it does not necessarily mean that this type of student will have access to more or better quality post-high school opportunities. This perception indicates the perceptions of the quality of education students with disabilities receive compared to their general education counterparts.

Opponents of declassification, such as SpEdT3, also noted that declassification was not appropriate for many students and would end in the loss of testing modifications and other "safety net" options. While a "safety net" may be beneficial to some students, it does not consider those who do not need it and are subsequently confined to special education under the premise that declassification may jeopardize academic achievement or graduation. The safety net may enable them to receive support, but it, in many ways, may simultaneously stunt their academic and social-emotional growth.

Within the second major theme, declassification was seen as a realistic option for select students, those who excelled academically, though it was rare. Further, and perhaps more importantly, declassification was communicated as a term/process used interchangeably to reduce restrictive placements, movement across the special education continuum, and mainstreaming. The ability to differentiate between mainstreaming and declassification is critical to families, students, and school districts. According to IDEA (2004), "mainstreaming" is a mandate that requires that "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities . . . [be] educated with children who are not disabled" (IDEA, 2004). Simply stated, a mainstreamed classroom is a general education classroom composed of students with disabilities and general education students for some or most of the instructional day. As such,

mainstreaming is not, and should not be, recognized as or used interchangeably with declassification.

Within the third major theme, participants communicated that multiple factors influenced declassification. Participants noted that CSE members, students, corresponding demographic factors, and school districts were among the myriad factors that affected declassification. SpEdT5, SpEdT2, and GenEdT2 noted that parents' factors played a role, such as lack of advocacy. GenEdT2 charges parents to question educational stakeholders during the IEP process to ensure that CSE or SCSE members make decisions in their children's best interest. She also expresses the perception that immigrant parents in urban school districts, such as the New York City Department of Education, are hesitant to advocate for their children due to school officials' perceived positional authority. While this perception is insightful and uncovers parents' perceived experiences during IEP meetings, they should not defer these feelings of powerlessness. The findings of Blue-Banning et al. (2004) further reiterate why communication, commitment, trust, and respect, among other qualities, are important in successful collaborative partnerships during the special education process. Ultimately, school districts are mandated to provide parents with notification that the CSE or SCSE is proposing (or refusing) to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, IEP, or placement of a student. Further, and perhaps, more importantly, parents are protected by due process in special education under IDEA (otherwise known as procedural rights and safeguards) in which they have the right to (a) participate in the decision making process (b) be fully informed, (c) be provided with translation and interpretation services, (c) challenge school decisions, (d)

mediation in disagreements about proposed plans, (e) impartial hearings to listen to both sides of a FAPE disagreement, (f) appeal the decision of an Impartial Hearing Officer, and (g) have a certified parent member at the IEP meeting. Lastly, the reality is that parents ultimately are required to consent to recommended services by the school district for their child (Mueller & Carranza, 2011).

Within the domain of factors that influence declassification, a variance in comprehensive IEP meetings emerged. Some participants noted that IEP meetings were rather quick and ineffective, while others described them as fairly comprehensive. In all, an overwhelming majority of participants indicated that declassification was not discussed during IEP meetings. The exclusion of declassification as a point of discussion during IEP meetings does not align with the special education process outlined in Figure 2. Specifically, declassification should/can be discussed during IEP development, placement and services, progress monitoring and reevaluation, annual and triennial reviews. Lastly, the exclusion of declassification discussion magnifies how special education becomes a life sentence for many students in urban school districts. In these cases, special education becomes a place akin to a prison cell where students are relegated for the duration of their educational careers, not a service where their exit is comprehensively discussed and often occurs. We must question whether special education prepares students to thrive and become individually successful contributing members of society or is it a place in which we merely house students away.

Within the third major theme, although one would hope that declassification would be reflected by students' responses to instruction or the severity of their

disability, it appears that students and their corresponding demographic factors influenced declassification. This was evidenced in participants' statements regarding students' home lives and references to economic advantage and behavior correlations. For example, Admin2 and SpEdT7 expressed that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds "present" need more academic support and assistance. Further, participants speculated on parents' motivations to keep their children classified to continue receiving social benefits. This perception is problematic and detrimental to these particular students in that it is saturated with bias and stereotypes. It also confirms McKenna's (2013) findings that socioeconomic factors, experiences with racism, deficit thinking, school and community demographics, the referral and assessment process, quality of instruction, and the subjective nature of the definition of special education may contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

Using a students' demographic factors to inform decision-making during the special education process has the capacity to target and confine particular students to special education, decreasing the likelihood of declassification. This perception also aligns to Ladson-Billings' concept of education debt which is characterized by the accumulated historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that manifest within our society and negatively impact students of color. Specifically, SpEdT7's perception reveals a historical debt marked by the deficit thinking of inferiority perpetuated and applied to people of color based on their race. The historical debt, and this perception, produce multigenerational poverty, illiteracy, and mistrust in schools (Ladson- Billings, 2007). Ironically, this debt caused families of

color to be suspicious of special ed programs rather than viewing them as an opportunity to help their children.

The third major theme within this research question suggested that school districts may influence declassification. Both SCouns1 and GenEdT1 specifically referenced how adequate school funding or the lack thereof could influence declassification. These perceptions align with the economic debt outlined in the conceptual framework. Ladson-Billings describes the economic debt as the funding disparities between schools serving white students and those serving students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2007). This urban school district primarily serves students of color and is based on GenEdT1 response. One can theorize that over time these accumulated funding disparities impact the quality and educational experience of students of color. An analysis of the themes that emerged from research question #1 suggests that CSE members recognize that declassification is a complex and rare process and concept within their school district.

Further, CSE members' perceptions about declassification reveal underlying racial, classist, and ableist undertones, which have long predominated the conversations on disability (Connor et al., 2016; Hehir, 2015). This was evident by omission. Participants reported no instances where they initiated declassification, and somewhere they opposed such a move when it was suggested by the students themselves or by their parents. The findings are consistent with the research of Knotek (2003), almost two decades earlier, who reported that teacher perceptions based on student behavior were a large factor in initial referral for special education

and recommendations for declassification. Perceived constraints for declassification do not appear to have changed over time.

Research Question #2

The second research question in this study investigated CSE members' perceptions about race and how, if it all, it influences declassification. The researcher identified six overarching themes; (a) CSE members' perceptions of race, (b) racial groups are treated differently, (c) perceptions of families of color may exist, (d) racial groups may perceive special education differently, (e) teacher bias about students may exist and influence the special education process, (f) race may influence declassification.

Several participants expressed a perception that race manifested itself in education and influenced their personal and professional lives. Many participants, such as Admin1, acknowledged that race afforded opportunities for some while limited those for others. This perception aligns with DisCrit as it encapsulates the concept that race is a privilege. Specifically, these participant responses reveal that white people have access to benefits merely by their affiliation. This privilege in tandem with the concept of white as property contributes to, sustains, and maintains the realities of racism at large as well as inequity in education.

Some participants, however, such as GenEdT1, did not acknowledge race at all. GenEdT1 expressed that race or racism is used as a tool against white people. This perception is a shift from the dominant narrative situating white people as victims of discrimination, exploitation, and prejudice at the hands of people of color. Additionally, Admin5 expressed that she does not believe in race nor that it is

important as she does not identify with any specific racial group. This perception does not acknowledge or take into account the far-reaching implications of the education debt, endemic racism, a lineage of white supremacy, and the violence of colonialism that historically and presently adversely impact students of color and their families. SpEdT7, GendEdT3, and SpEdT3 expressed a perception that some racial groups are viewed and treated differently than others. These views, or what participants described as stereotypes, influenced how CSE members viewed, interacted, or thought about racial groups. GenEdT3 articulated that despite perceptions that may exist about racial groups above all else we are all human. This participant response is profound in that society's perceptions of racial groups has the capacity to adversely affect them so much that it warrants a cry for humanity. This further reveals the far reaching implications of race as a social construct. Participants expressed that perceptions and bias about students and families of color exist, and that race influenced declassification. Specifically, participants such as Admin2, communicated that perceptions of students of color exists which describe them as incapable of performing academically. Other participants, such as SpEdT6 communicated that some CSE members believed that special education is where students of color belonged. The realities of these perceptions are seen when synthesized by DisCrit. Specifically, these perceptions reveal how race acts as an exclusionary social construct that negatively impacts the very existence of students and families of color even when laws and legislation are seemingly put in place to prevent it.

Lastly, within this research question, GenEdT3 expressed the perception that racial groups viewed special education differently. According to the data, white people

viewed special education as a service opportunity that affords academic benefits. Families of color however, perceived special education as a system that continues to fail its children. Additionally, families of color viewed special education as financial means to an end. The perception that families keep their students in special education due to the financial support received by the federal government also reveals the far reaching implications of the education debt that continues to plague communities of color.

Research Question #3

The third research question investigated how, if at all, CSE members' perceptions of ability influence declassification. The researcher identified seven overarching themes; (a) a variance exists in the purpose/goals of special education, (b) an emphasis on mainstreaming exists, (c) variance of the perceptions of the definition of ability exists, many of which are rooted in the stigma of special education, (d) barriers may exist that prevent educators from accurately assessing students' ability (e) a variance exists in how CSE members view the abilities SWD's, (f) academic and behavioral achievement may influence declassification including grade level and, (g) students are placed in special education due to academic and behavioral concerns.

Within the first theme, several participants (i.e., Admin2 and GenEdT3) expressed that students with disabilities should receive the same or a comparable education to general education students. This perception aligns with the framework of IDEA- a free and appropriate public education where students' needs, to the maximum extent possible, are met in a general education setting. CSE members,

however, expressed a variance in their perceptions of the purpose/goals of special education. Some expressed that the purpose of special education was to develop independence and advocacy in students. Participants also suggested that the purpose of special education was to transition students out of high school to become contributing citizens. The variance in the perceptions of the purpose of special education is rooted in DisCrit's ongoing discussion of the able-bodied shaping normalcy for students with disabilities.

Within this research question, participants also revealed that mainstreaming was a common practice that overshadowed declassification. CSE members were more likely to recommend mainstreaming than declassification. This emphasis uncovers CSE members' deep-rooted perceptions of students with disabilities and their capacity to thrive in a general education setting without special education supports. Several participants expressed a perception that CSE members do not believe students with disabilities can succeed academically. They suggested that CSE members and other educators view students with disabilities as lazy, less than, and cognitively limited. This perception was rooted in the stigma associated with the abilities of students who need and receive special education services. These perceptions reveal how ableism devalues disability and results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that disability inherently means deficiency. Suppose a student who has a disability can perform in the general education setting. In that case, they should not be confined to special education or fall victim to the deficit perceptions of able-bodied persons. This is because the weight of ableism is debilitating to the height and speed of students with disabilities' educational trajectory.

While CSE members mostly held deficit perceptions of the abilities of students with disabilities, they also expressed that barriers existed that prevented them from accurately assessing them. Specifically, participants did not feel confident about the reliability and accuracy of the assessments that were used. Further, in addition to expressing concern with testing tools, participants (SpEdT6, SpEdC2, Admin2) communicated that the district was significantly behind in the special education processes as a whole. These concerns influenced the likelihood of declassification because data was not representative of students' present level of performance.

Several participants expressed a perception that a student's academic and behavioral achievement influenced declassification. If a student "behaved" or demonstrated achievement in school, they were more likely to be declassified than students that did not. It was also suggested that male students often displayed "adverse" behavior as perceived by school staff and were more likely to remain in special education than females. Lastly, some participants expressed that grade level may influence declassification in that upper-level high school students were less likely to be declassified. Parallel to the theme that a student's academic and behavioral achievement influenced declassification, another theme emerged that expressed the perception that students are placed in special education due to academic and behavioral concerns. At the epicenter of these themes are CSE members' Eurocentric, female, White, and Christian ideals that act as a lens in their behavior interpretations. These interpretations and ideals shape normalcy and ultimately adversely impact and contribute to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education.

Participants indicated that the overrepresentation of minorities in special education is a problem but thought that statistics did not necessarily stand out in their district, which comprised largely of minority students. The findings suggest that the historical construction of difference makes institutionalized racism, classism, and sexism seem natural in their conflation with a disability, defined as oppression based on ableism (Reid & Knight, 2007). The real-life impact of social constructs is evident as CSE members' perceptions and attitudes about race and ability influence a student's educational trajectory's height and speed, contributing to why findings suggest that declassification is a rare occurrence. Steps that could have been taken to help voice options for students and their parents, recommended by researchers such as Zargona et al. (2018), such as CSE conference pre-meetings, information sessions, and discussions of long-term impacts, were notably absent.

There is an inherent intersection of implications as they relate to the second and third research questions. The findings related to questions 2 and 3 further support the view that not much has changed in the past decades regarding the predominance of behavior-based concerns as the basis for special education classification (Knotek, 2003). The responses underscore the need for professional development in culturally relevant pedagogy.

An analysis of the implications of research questions two and three reveal that the social and political constructs of race and ability are contributing factors that carry a burden of historical and prejudicial connotations that infiltrate and influence declassification and the special education process. The constructs are so integrated into the discourses, procedures, and institutions of education (Connors et al., 2016)

that individuals in the system are uncritical of their presence. This is problematic in that CSE members are gatekeepers to the entrance (eligibility) and exit (declassification) of special education; however, many of their perceptions devalue disability and uncritically assert that it inherently means deficiency (Hehir, 2015), thus excluding students with disabilities, mainly students of color, from gaining access to the general education setting in the form of declassification. The perspective was evident in the participants' responses to declassification as possible only if they excelled academically. DisCrit emphasizes that race and dis/ability are exclusionary social constructs rooted in normalcy, not biology. Further, it acknowledges that these social constructs and their corresponding application of deficit thinking and inferiority negatively impact students of color. DisCrit aligns with the study findings as students' race and disability status act as social constructs that define what they are perceivably able/unable to do and whether it will exclude them.

DisCrit recognizes multidimensional identities rather than the singular notions of identity, such as race, dis/ability, social class, or gender that dominate our society (Connor et al., 2016). Students with disabilities have multidimensional identities such as language, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexuality, and religion that intersect. As suggested by the findings, these identities are viewed as different and substandard and depart from normative culture. Findings suggested that many participants perceived students with disabilities and their parents as uneducated. Based on the data collected, student demographic factors and their multidimensional identities also appeared to influence declassification. Indicators such as gender, socioeconomic status, and home life influenced the likelihood of declassification.

Research Question #4

The fourth research question in this study investigated ways in which, if at all, the ethnicity of CSE members influences their perceptions/attitudes about declassification. The researcher found five overarching themes. The findings reveal that CSE members had different perceptions of race based on their backgrounds. They articulated that being a part of a racial group had defining characteristics and suggested that differences exist in how they perceive and experience race. CSE members shared mixed experiences of how/if race played a role in how their colleagues viewed them. Lastly, the findings suggested that female, White, and Christian ideals may influence declassification.

SpEdT6, GenEdT2, and SCouns1, all African-American females expressed that race meant skin color, historical background and ethnicity. Admin4 went on to say that race connects to all facets of the world. Further, SCouns1 articulated that race meant drama and conflict. These responses reveal how subjective and multi-faceted the concept of race can be for individuals as CSE members had different perceptions, definitions, and experiences of race. It also reveals the real-life impact and far reaching implications of social constructs. Specifically, it uncovers the ways in which a legacy of white supremacy and endemic racism impacts particular communities. Lastly, these perceptions create the foundation for discussion situated around how educational stakeholders' perceptions of race may have the capacity to influence interactions, policies, and procedures within school districts and buildings.

The second major theme within this research question suggested that being part of a racial group has defining characteristics. Participants who identified as

Black/African-American used words like “caregiver,” “perseverance,” “have less, but always end up doing well,” “survivors,” and “pride” when describing what their race meant to them. Participants who identified as white described what their race means to them as “I should be reflective on who I am and how I interact with people,” “it means nothing we are all God’s children,” “privilege,” “white fragility,” “I never thought about it until working in an inner-city school,” and “I don’t see myself any different than anyone else.” There are stark differences in participants' self-perceptions of race. This may be a product of white guilt, privilege, or the inability to recognize or acknowledge the role race has historically and contemporarily has shaped this country. It also reveals the far reaching implications of race as a social construct. In the present study, where the district comprised a largely minority enrollment, the participants did not note the interaction between race and classification. Instead, they focused on individual student ability, student behavior, and parent motivations as explanatory factors. While some respondents did reflect on the broader issue of minority overrepresentation in special education, they did not offer any specific examples of their response to this fact in their practice.

The third major theme within this research question suggested that differences exist in how racial groups perceive or experience race. Several participants, such as SpEdT1, expressed a perception that being a part of a specific racial group afforded opportunities and privileges based on their affiliation that are inaccessible to those of other ethnic groups. Participants expressed their experiences with being in a particular racial group and how it has impacted their personal and professional lives. SpEdT4 and SpEdT2 were candid in experiences in which white

coworkers incorrectly identified them as belonging to their ethnic group and communicated their deficit perceptions about other ethnic groups. As it relates to participants' treatment based on their race, while there were some that did not experience ill treatment, all respondents acknowledged that race did have the capacity to influence perceptions. SpEdC2, SpEdT7, and GenEdT4 expressed that their competence, not race, influenced how they were treated by fellow CSE members. Admin1 and Admin3 however, expressed that their race ultimately influenced how CSE members viewed their ability to advocate for students of color because they were white. Additionally, the study findings suggested that participants had mixed experiences of how race influenced their views. Some respondents of color indicated no great effect, but others were recounting their own experiences with bias. Lastly, participants described how female, white, and Christian ideals might influence declassification and their entire world view on interacting with students from diverse backgrounds. This perception, rooted in white normalcy, does not apply to all students however those that do not conform are subject to a myriad of consequences; a life sentence in special education being one of them.

Limitations of the Study

The study had limitations that may have had an impact on the findings. First, the qualitative phenomenological research design is a limitation due to the researcher's active role and positionality and the potential for researcher bias. The researcher was the only investigator who collected and coded the data. The study did not employ a co-researcher with which to corroborate. In phenomenological studies, the researcher has a personal interest in what he/ she seeks to know; the researcher is

intimately connected with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As a result, the outcomes and addressing data collection are subject to the researcher's bias (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

A second limitation also relates to the characteristics of phenomenology, which may lead to specific limitations of generalizability results for differing contexts other than the context represented within the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The study findings should be interpreted as representative of the CSE participants' experiences and not necessarily representative of and applicable to the spectrum of experiences and perceptions of all CSE members across the country. Given that this study includes CSE members' experiences from one urban school district within the eastern region of the United States, the applicability of results to other school districts may be limited. This school district, however, is typical of secondary schools in urban locations.

A third limitation is while the snowball sampling method (or chain-referral sampling) enabled the researcher to reach populations that were otherwise difficult to sample and simultaneously ensured that participants met the criteria of the study, he had little control over who was interviewed because he had to rely mainly on previous subjects' recommendations (Creswell, 2017). It is common for participants to recommend others who share similar traits and characteristics, which puts generalizability at risk.

A fourth limitation is the researcher intended to interview parents and students as they serve as key stakeholders of the CSE and the special education decision-making process; however, due to COVID-19 and strict IRB requirements, which

placed students with disabilities as a protected population, he was not able to gain access to this potential sample. More details may have emerged if parents and students were included in the study increasing triangulation and trustworthiness.

A fifth limitation is using in-depth, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews as the only data collection method. The research design facilitated an opportunity to examine how CSE and SCSE members perceive race and ability and whether a relationship exists between those perceptions and disproportionate declassification rates in urban school districts; however, direct observations of the CSE and SCSE meetings were not possible. Another limitation of employing interviews is the inability to elicit the same responses at the beginning of the data collection process as at the end. Simply stated, the researcher became more skilled in conducting interviews as he completed more interviews until saturation.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The federal laws, guidelines, and procedural safeguards for entrance/initial eligibility into special education are explicitly detailed within IDEA. Guidelines for exit or declassification from special education are not as detailed or specific. While it allows for creativity, autonomy, and policy development for school districts and CSE's, this ambiguity for declassification is detrimental to the students who receive special education services at large. The researcher recommends special education policy reform. He specifically calls for the reauthorization of IDEA to develop the already existing declassification policy/procedure to make it as comprehensive and robust as eligibility. The researcher recommends the development of a declassification framework within IDEA. CSE members who participated in this

research study indicated a need to take a closer look at their school districts' declassification policy and expressed frustrations with the ambiguity of special education law related to declassification. Participants also communicated that the eligibility, revaluation, and assessment processes were long, backlogged, and not trustworthy. Table 5 outlines targeted suggestions for educational stakeholders.

Table 5

Suggestions for Educational Stakeholders

Stakeholder(s)	Suggestions
United States Department of Education (USED)	Reauthorize IDEA (2004) to explicitly outline a new, robust, and comprehensive framework (policies/procedures) for declassification Provide school districts with additional funding for declassification. However, to mitigate bogus declassification, the USED should require school districts to substantiate students' exit by providing frameworks for increased progress monitoring and assessments that accurately assess students' abilities and capacity to achieve academically in the general education setting.
School District	Closely monitor special education data as it relates to the referral, continuation of services, and declassification as a way to interrogate and disrupt racial disparities in special education. Invite appropriate educational stakeholders to develop and implement a districtwide declassification framework (policies/procedures) Create a comprehensive district-wide professional learning plan that includes all stakeholders in the planning process that emphasizes growth mindset, implicit bias training, and social justice advocacy Ensure adequate staff hiring of school psychologists

Administrators	Mandate that declassification is a standing item to be discussed at all IEP meetings Monitor school-wide declassification data Collaborate with appropriate educational stakeholders to facilitate parent workshops, including students, that focus on parent advocacy and navigating the special education process Increase professional learning that is focused on UDL, RTI/MTSS, and culturally relevant, responsive, and reality pedagogy. Provide general and special education teachers as well as related service providers with common planning periods
School-Based CSE Members (general education teachers, special education teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, social workers, related service providers, department chairs/leads	Collaborate to not only deliver rigorous, yet appropriate, instruction for students with disabilities but also to critically employ progress monitoring strategies to accurately assess students present level of performance as well as their capacity to achieve academically, if appropriate, without mandated services and supports Ensure that declassification is a standing item to be discussed at all IEP meetings Receive professional development that emphasizes using effective research-based instructional strategies to support diverse students

Further, the federal government and school districts should closely monitor declassification data to interrogate and disrupt racial disparities in special education. The federal government provides additional funding to school districts that serve

students with disabilities. School funding however, is not always equitable, especially in schools that are located in regions that serve students of color and those in low socio-economic areas. The reality is that funding inequalities exist, which research notes is highly correlated to differences in race and socio-economics (Annamma et al., 2013). As such, to address disparities in declassification, the federal government may consider providing school districts with additional funding for declassification. To mitigate bogus declassification, the federal government should force school districts to substantiate students' exit by providing frameworks for increased progress monitoring and assessments that accurately assess student abilities.

As school districts have the autonomy to develop their declassification process/policy, all stakeholders must be involved in its creation. Focusing on developing uniform practices and an understanding that declassification is an option for all students is critical to rewriting the narrative of declassification as rare. Simply mandating that declassification be a standing item for discussion and consideration on an annual review/triennial meeting agenda is a start and could have long-lasting influences on the likelihood that students of color exit special education.

Another recommendation for future practice is for the school district and administrators to invest in disrupting the manifestation of the stigma of special education, which has psychological implications, by offering mandated professional learning/development around growth mindset, implicit bias training, and social justice. This would also serve as a vehicle for staff/faculty to question their assumptions and develop other ways to support student success. The researcher also suggests that school based instructional staff are provided with professional

development opportunities that focuses on culturally relevant, responsive, and reality pedagogy. Schools should prioritize common planning sessions between general and special education teachers as well as related service providers to discuss candidates for declassification. This collaboration is critical to not only addressing the disparities in the quality of education that students with disabilities receive but also, declassification. The researcher also recommends that schools provide families, including students, with materials and resources to support them in advocating on their behalf as they navigate the special education process.

The researcher also recommends that schools employ an RTI (Response to Intervention) or MTSS (Multi-Tiered System Supports) framework to provide targeted academic and behavioral support to struggling students as well as students with disabilities. This evidence based and data informed framework has the capacity to not only provide support to students but also to address racial disparities in special education referrals and improve academic achievement and behavioral functioning. Further, situating an effective RTI/MTSS program at the epicenter of a school district ensures that decision making is data based and does not include arbitrary factors -- such as race.

Lastly, Annamma et al. (2016) emphasizes and supports activism and promotes diverse forms of resistance against domination. In the scope of this study, educational stakeholders must engage in activism and resistance against policies/procedures that act as barriers from preventing students of color from rightful access to educational opportunities afforded to their white counterparts.

Recommendations for Future Research

While there is a wealth of literature that substantiates the claim that students of color are disproportionately represented in special education, there is a gap in the research exploring how these students exit special education and the forces/factors that may attribute to why this is the case. The findings of this phenomenological study extend knowledge in the sector of education to raise awareness of the manifestation of racism and ableism in education. It merely offers a preliminary view, and there are still numerous areas in need of exploration by future researchers. Previous research had not explored this concept; however, my study's findings offer a foundation for building and extending future investigations that continue to explore this phenomenon. For further research considerations, I suggest performing/replicating this study in other United States regions. This may help determine the similarity and continuity of experiences between CSEs across the country. Among the related topics that warrant future research would be (a) exploring social justice and equity professional learning for school districts with disproportionate eligibility and declassification rates and (b) exploring the relationship between students' socio-economic status, demographic identity, and duration in special education. These studies may positively impact race relations, cultural competency, and the recognition of implicit bias.

Based on the study limitations, a suggestion for future research would be to explore students' experiences as they relate to race, ability, the special education process, and declassification. Lastly, the researcher also suggests conducting a longitudinal study that explores the perceptions of students of color with disabilities that enter special

education and those that remain eligible. This would be especially beneficial to the field of special education.

Conclusion

In January 1897, at the University of Chicago, Professor John Dewey published a paper entitled "My Pedagogic Creed." He divided this article into five sections providing insight into his philosophy on the nature of education and schools' appropriate role. Dewey's manifesto suggested that "Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself" (Dewey, 1897). For many years I thought that I understood the meaning of Dewey's philosophy. It reflected my unwavering commitment to the field of education, my belief in the organic process of teaching, learning, and leading, and it illustrated why education would forever be of unparalleled importance to me. However, as I have continued my education and advanced professionally, I finally realize that John Dewey's pedagogic creed means so much more.

Dewey presented his view of an ideal system of education. I, however, have come to learn and experience the realities of how that educational system operates in today's world-it is plagued by the ills of society. When inadequately designed, education can cause de-socialization. It can stunt and impede growth and, conversely, will not prepare students for life. My newfound understanding shows me that our educational system is a far departure from John Dewey's ideal one, and this is why, through applied research, we must seek to have a positive impact on current and future educational policies that may combat the manifestation of the ills of society in our school system.

Disrupting the legacy of white supremacy in special education is not only a social process, growth, and preparation for life itself, but it is also an arduous task. In this research, the perceptions/attitudes of CSE members about race and ability influenced decision-making and declassification during the special education process. The study suggests a relationship between race and ability perceptions and the disproportionate declassification rates in urban school districts. While reforming special education policy related to declassification may be a long-term goal due to its bureaucratic nature, urban school districts that invest in disrupting deficit mindsets rooted in perceptions of race and ability may experience a positive and quicker step toward its mitigation. As researchers and educators, we must explore methods to meet our constituents, students, and family's specific needs. It is critical that we are aware of the lineage of social constructs that inform how we interact with each other and our students and use it as a springboard to disrupt its manifestation in our school systems. By examining the relationship between districts, schools, teachers, and students, we can develop improved procedures, protocols, guidelines, and special education policies. This is the commitment. This is the work.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW INTRODUCTION PROTOCOL

Hi, my name is Rasheed Bility. I'm pursuing a Doctor of Education at St. John's University. My dissertation is specifically about the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of CSE or SCSE members of committees on special education or IEP team, specifically educational administrators, general and special education teachers, and related service providers (school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, guidance counselors, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists), about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process.

In other words, I am interested in how race and ability to influence students of color who receive special education services.

Before we start, I want to walk through the consent form you signed so you are aware of your rights and my responsibilities [go through form].

Do you have any questions?

I will be audiotaping this interview just to be sure that I don't miss any important comments. The file is for my records only. It will not be available to groups or individuals outside of the dissertation committee and destroyed at the end of the project.

Is it ok if I audiotape this interview?

If you don't mind, I'm going to ask some questions. You don't have to answer them if you don't want, but they may help me make sense of all these interviews. There are

no right or wrong answers to the questions we will ask. Consider this a chance to make your voice heard. Your opinion is valued and respected.

Remember, all answers will be confidential and anonymous. What you say in this room stays in this room. Federal law and our research standards require this. We may use what you say, but no statements will be linked to your name. We will produce a report, but we will not link any names to the report's comments. We also ask each of you not to share what others have said. It's OK to tell people the general comments made, but please do not use anyone's name.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think students are placed in special education?
2. What are the ultimate goals for students who receive special education services at large?
3. What do you know about declassification?
4. Please describe your school's process/policy for declassifying students.
    a. Does your school district have a memorialized and documented process for declassification?
5. What do you believe are the basis/ground that would warrant declassification?
6. Have you personally recommended for students to receive special education services? Why?
    a. If so, do parents object? Accept? If so, why? Why not?
7. Has the CSE or SCSE that you are/were a part of ever recommend students for declassification?
    a. If yes, did the team agree? And why? Did parents agree?
    b. If no, why do you believe students are not recommended for declassification?
8. Can you describe your role in the IEP process?
9. Describe a typical IEP meeting?
    a. What is discussed?
    b. Is declassification an item that is discussed as an option for students during IEP meetings? If not, why not?
    c. Do you feel that there are students at your school that are candidates for declassification?
    d. How do stakeholders participate in the discussion at IEP meetings?
    e. Can you describe equity of voice at IEP meetings?
10. Why do you or don't you think a declassification is a realistic option for students with disabilities?
11. What factors do you believe play a role in/influence the likelihood that a special education student will become declassified?
    a. From your experience, Why/how, if at all, would a student's identify play a role in or influence declassification?
    b. From your experience, Why/how, if at all, would a students' sex (male or female) play a role in or influence declassification?
    c. From your experience, Why/how, if at all, would a students' socioeconomic status play a role in or influence declassification?

    d. From your experience, Why/how, if at all, would a students' race/ethnicity play a role in or influence declassification?
12. In what ways, if at all, do you think that the resources of a student's school play a role in/influence declassification?
13. In what ways do you think students, if at all, would be impacted by declassification?
14. How would you describe your identity? (race, ethnicity, religion, sex)
15. What does race mean to you?
16. What does your race/ethnicity specifically mean to you?
17. What does ability mean to you?
18. How do you think your fellow CSE or SCSE members feel about sped students and their intellectual ability/capacity?
19. Are there any barriers that may exist that may prevent the CSE or SCSE from accurately assessing a child's ability? If so, can you describe these barriers?
20. How, if at all, does race manifests itself in special education?
21. From your experience, why, if it all, do you think students of color remain in special education?
22. How, if at all, does trust play in role in the special education process?
    a. Which family population (race/ethnicity) has the most trust in education? Least trust? Why?
23. Can you describe any particularly difficult or traumatic experience in your life related to being part of your racial group in school? BOTH
    a. To what extent, if at all, do you feel that your race plays a role in how CSE or SCSE members perceive you?
    b. To what extent, if at all, do you feel that your race plays a role in how CSE or SCSE members perceive your ability to advocate for students

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION FORM

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
St. John's University

Title of Study: Is Special Education a Life Sentence? Examining Disproportionality in the Declassification Rates of Students of Color in an Urban School District

Investigator:

Name: Rasheed Bility Dept: School of Education Phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Introduction

- You have been invited to participate in a research study that examines how, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the subcommittee and committee on special education about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process. This study will be conducted by Rasheed Bility, Administrative and Instructional Leadership, School of Education at St. John's University as part of his doctoral dissertation. His faculty sponsor and dissertation chair is Dr. Randall Clemens, Administrative and Instructional Leadership, School of Education at St. John's University
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are an administrator, teacher, school psychologist, or related service provider in an urban school district
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE, specifically educational administrators, general and special education teachers, and related service providers (school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, guidance counselors, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists), about race and ability influence decision making and

declassification during the special education process
- Ultimately, this research may be part of a dissertation towards a Doctor of Education in Administration and Supervision and published.

Description of the Study Procedures
- If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions in an interview related to your experiences as a CSE or SCSE member.
- Additionally, interviews will be audiotaped. You may review these tapes and request that all or any portion of the tapes be destroyed, including your participation.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study
- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks. There may be unknown risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study
- While there are no expected direct benefits to participating, this study's findings are intended to inform other educational institutions of the impact of incorporating sustainability into education and assist the field of education.

Confidentiality
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or others. Your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher.

Payments
- You will not be paid for this study.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
- Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the investigator of this study or St. John's University. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question and withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns
- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during, or after the research.

- If you have any further questions about the study, at any time, feel free to contact me, Rasheed Bility, at rxxx@stjohns.edu or by telephone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. If you would like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you.
- If you have any problems or concerns resulting from your participation, you can report them to Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, IRB Chair, at 718-990-1440. Alternatively, concerns can be reported by completing a Participant Complaint Form, which can be found on the IRB website at https://www.stjohns.edu/academics/provost/grants-and-sponsored-research/humanparticipants-irb-animal-use-research
- For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Subject's Name (print):

---_____

Subject's Signature: _____ Date:

_____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date:

_____

APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT FLYER

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Recruitment Flyer

If you are an education administrator, a licensed special or general education teacher, or a related service provider in an urban school district, please consider participating in this research study that examines the extent to which, if at all, CSE or SCSE members' perceptions/attitudes about race and ability influence decision making and declassification during the special education process

If you are eligible for the study, you will be asked to participate in an individual virtual interview via Zoom. These interviews will last for a range of 30 to 90 minutes in length.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact:

Rasheed Bility

Email: rxxxxxx@stjohns.edu

Phone: (xxx)xxx-xxxx

APPENDIX E: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Recruitment Script

Hello, my name is Rasheed Bility. I am a graduate student at St. John's University in Administration and Supervision, Doctor of Education Program. I am conducting research on the extent to which, if at all, the perceptions/attitudes of members of the CSE and SCSE about ability and race influence decision making and declassification during the special education process in urban school districts. I am inviting you to participate in this study because I would like to hear more about your experiences with the issue.

Participation in this research is voluntary and involves participating in at least one interview with me about your experiences with race, ability, and decision making in the special education process. Each interview will take approximately 30 to 90 minutes of your time.

Please be advised that participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate, we can go ahead and schedule a time for me to meet with you to give you more information. If you need more time to decide if you would like to participate, you may also call or email me with your decision.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at my cell: (xxx) xxx-xxxx or email rxxxxxxx@stjohns.edu.

APPENDIX F: ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Mar 2, 2020 12:07 PM EST

PI: Rasheed Bility
CO-PI: randall clemens
Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2020-422** *IS SPECIAL EDUCATION A LIFE SENTENCE? EXAMINING DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE DECLASSIFICATION RATES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION*

Dear Rasheed Bility:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *IS SPECIAL EDUCATION A LIFE SENTENCE? EXAMINING DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE DECLASSIFICATION RATES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION*. The approval is effective from March 1, 2020 through February 28, 2021

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

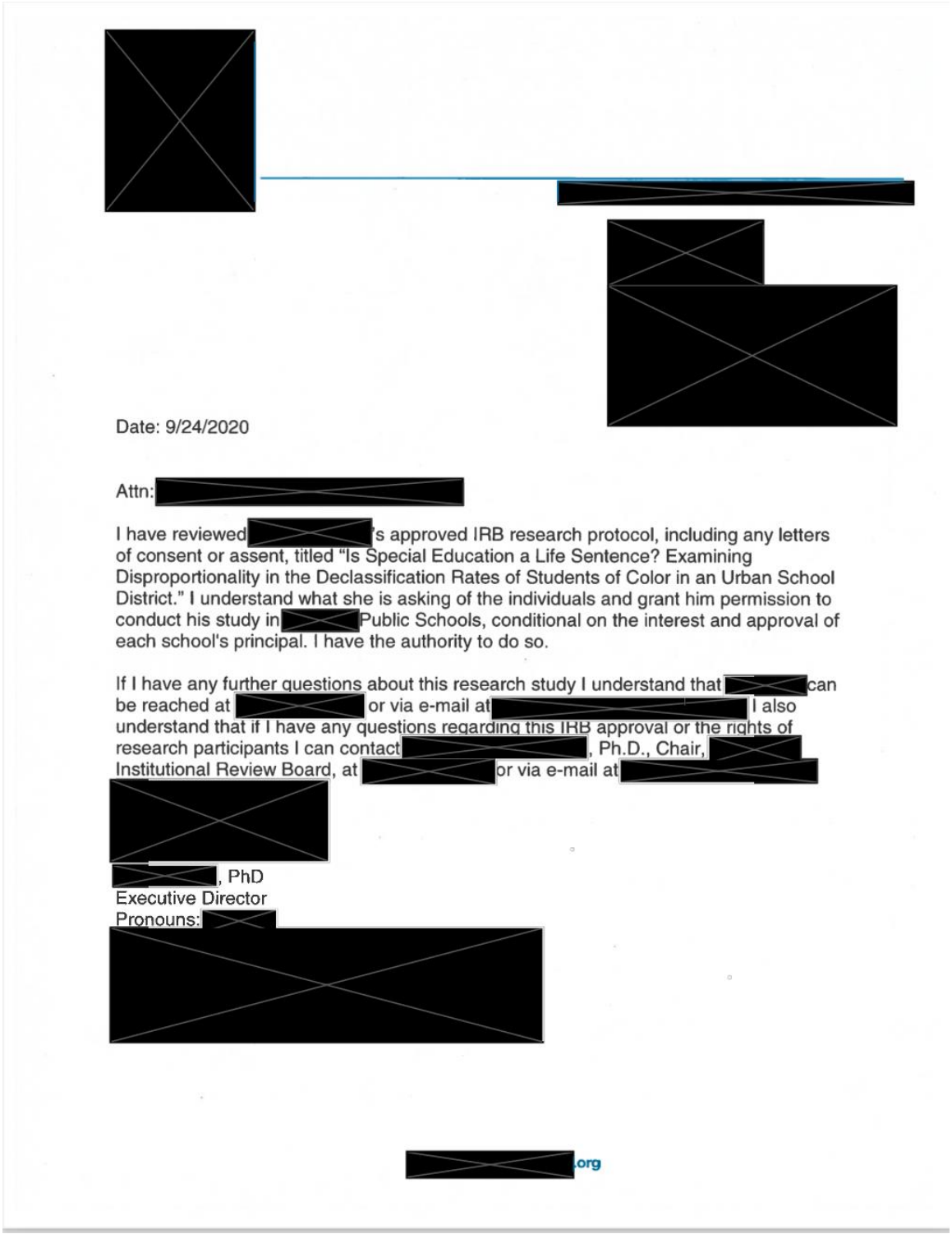
Selected Category:

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX G: DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH, EVALUATION AND REPORTING DISTRICT IRB APPROVAL



[redacted]

Date: 9/24/2020

Attn: [redacted]

I have reviewed [redacted]'s approved IRB research protocol, including any letters of consent or assent, titled "Is Special Education a Life Sentence? Examining Disproportionality in the Declassification Rates of Students of Color in an Urban School District." I understand what she is asking of the individuals and grant him permission to conduct his study in [redacted] Public Schools, conditional on the interest and approval of each school's principal. I have the authority to do so.

If I have any further questions about this research study I understand that [redacted] can be reached at [redacted] or via e-mail at [redacted] I also understand that if I have any questions regarding this IRB approval or the rights of research participants I can contact [redacted], Ph.D., Chair, Institutional Review Board, at [redacted] or via e-mail at [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted], PhD
Executive Director
Pronouns: [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted].org

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