



Research paper

# Personal deficiency, racism, or culture clash?: Teacher candidates' beliefs about why racial discipline disparities exist

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## ABSTRACT

In this exploratory qualitative study, we mapped out the ideological frames a sample of teacher education students from a large SE university in the US adopt to make sense of why racial discipline disproportionality persists. We examined both the prevalence of deficit and structural ideologies, and tried to uncover ideological positions and justifications that fall in-between these ideologies. Findings show that participants' responses fell all over the ideological continuum, as some attributed educational disparities to supposed deficiencies in students' cultures or communities, others to a lack of teachers' understandings of their students' cultures or to individual biases, and yet others to structural and institutional racism. We propose the following implications for teacher education programs: teacher educators should push teacher candidates to identify and address their implicit biases and to understand their relationship to societal injustice; teacher educators should equip teacher candidates with skills that help them see students and their families from an asset-based lens, not a deficit lens; and finally, teacher educators should teach teacher candidates explicitly about equitable and culturally responsive pedagogy.

## 1. Introduction

This is a fact: In the United States, Black students are more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled from school (The Government Accountability Office, 2018). This fact has been measured in a variety of ways, in regional and national studies and across gender and socioeconomic status (Morris & Perry, 2016; Shi & Zhu, 2022; Shollenberger, 2015). There is no debate on this fact.

Scholars who study these racial discipline disparities have attempted to determine their nature in order to understand why they exist (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Staats, 2015–2016). What they have found is that the primary cause of discipline disproportionality appears to be racial bias in how educators interpret and respond to subjective behaviors—the types of behaviors that have to be interpreted, such as *the student behaved in an aggressive manner* (Girvan et al., 2017; Ispa-Landa, 2018; Kunesh & Noltenmeyer, 2019) as well as institutionalized racism in how and to whom the most serious punishments are doled out (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Milner et al., 2019). What scholarship *doesn't* show is that Black students misbehave more than their white peers or that when they do misbehave, they do so in more serious, dangerous ways (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Huang, 2016). What they *do* show is that Black students' behaviors are more likely *interpreted* by adults in schools as misbehaviors than similar behaviors exhibited by white students (Heilbrun & Cornell, 2015; Johnston et al., 2014).

Schools and districts have adopted a variety of strategies for shrinking this disparity, sometimes in response to federal civil rights suits. For example, some schools and districts enact policies and procedures meant to curtail or altogether eliminate suspensions and expulsions (e.g., Cornwell, 2015). Others adopt Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and other discipline frameworks with goals that might include ensuring Black students clearly understand behavior expectations or incentivizing better behaviors (Payno-Simmons, 2021). Still others embrace approaches to provide Black students with opportunities to improve their behavior through mindfulness or emotional regulation (Skiba et al., 2014). Some might attempt to address the disparity more directly through anti-bias training (Cox et al., 2017; Meissel et al., 2016; Woo et al., 2021).

These responses are where ideology meets practice. If educators wrongly believe that Black students inherently misbehave more often or more seriously than white students—if they *wrongly* presume that racial discipline disproportionality is trackable primarily to the behaviors, mindsets, attitudes, or emotions of Black students rather than racial bias and institutional racism—then their institutions are more likely to adopt and enact strategies for addressing that disproportionality that focus on adjusting something about Black students rather than implementing strategies that eliminate racism that is operating in discipline practices. Scholars who study the relationship between ideology and practice related to matters of equity and justice have described this ideological

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frame, in which people attribute a disparity to a supposed cultural, behavioral, attitudinal, or even spiritual deficiency among the people targeted by the disparity, as *deficit ideology* (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Sleeter, 2004).

On the other hand, if educators understand that, as research has consistently demonstrated (Girvan et al., 2017; Kunesh & Noltenmeyer, 2019; Milner et al., 2015), it results primarily from racial bias and institutional racism, they and their schools might be more likely to adopt and enact the only strategies that have any chance of closing or eliminating the disparity: eliminating racial bias and eradicating institutional racism. Scholars have described this sort of ideological frame, in which people attribute a disparity to systemic injustice and resulting gaps in access and opportunity as *structuralist* or *structural ideology* (Feagin, 1975).

These ideological conceptions might seem somewhat disconnected from the day-to-day practical realities and institutional cultures of schools. But, as Gorski and Swalwell (2023) argue, attending to ideology might be the most effective practical approach to sustainably adjusting practice and institutional culture. If educators and their institutions *misattribute* the causes of racial discipline disproportionality or of any other disparity, they have no real chance even of imagining effective ways to eliminate it because their solutions will focus on solving the wrong problems. If the problem is racial bias and institutional racism, then adjusting the mindsets and behaviors of people experiencing the racism rather than directly confronting and attending to the racism only perpetuates that problem. Discussing the importance of rejecting deficit explanations for disparate educational outcomes, McLure and Reed (2022) argued that the deficit approach mindlessly blames students for institutional conditions. When schools try to solve academic or other disparities with this view, they warn, “we put [students] right back into the system that didn’t serve them in the first place” (p. 43).

In this exploratory study, we were interested in mapping out the ideological frames adopted by a sample of teacher education students to make sense of why racial discipline disproportionality persists. We hoped to examine the prevalence of deficit and structural ideologies. But more importantly, we wanted to understand the range of ideological positions and justifications that constitute these ideological poles and perhaps even uncover ideological positions and justifications that fall in-between them. Doing so will better prepare us and, we hope, other teacher educators to more effectively navigate the misunderstandings and leverage the understandings of future teachers as we help them be more effective advocates for racial equity. Our research question was, *How do teacher education students understand why racial discipline disparities exist?*

## 2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that guided our study and data analysis is based on a reimagining of attribution theory as originally developed by sociologist Joe Feagin (1972) to map people’s assumptions about why poverty exists. In short, Feagin and scholars who followed him (e.g., Ljubotina & Ljubotina, 2007) determined that people tend to attribute the existence of poverty to deficit-oriented individualistic causes (laziness, lack of will), structural causes (discrimination, lack of opportunities), or fatalistic causes (God’s will, luck). (See Bastias et al., 2024 for a comprehensive review of poverty-related scholarship that emerged from Feagin’s 1972 original attribution studies). Over time as scholars have applied this framework to other disparities, including racial disparities (e.g., Lowery & Burrow, 2019), they have kept the spirit of this framework, especially the polar individualist and structural attributions, while adjusting some of the language and attribution categories to capture more contemporary ideological frames or context-specific considerations, such as by using language like “deficit ideology” instead of “individualist” attributions, attempting to better capture the nature of those attributions in specific contexts.

In the case of this study we, too, maintained the core polar

attributions from Feagin’s (1972) and others’ earlier attribution theory scholarship but adjusted the language to reflect how these attributions have been characterized in more recent scholarship related to race and attributions of racial disparities in education systems (e.g., Cabrera, 2019; Milner, 2018). In order to gauge participants’ sensemaking regarding the causes of racial discipline disparities, we embraced Gorski’s (2019) attribution frames that have been refined to understand the ideological underpinnings of Feagin’s (1972) and others’ attribution categories. These frames include.

- *deficit* ideology, which speaks to the ideological underpinnings of Feagin’s (1972) individualist attribution,
- *grit* ideology, a specific manifestation of deficit ideology that has grown increasing popular as grit and resilience discourses have taken hold in schools, and
- *structural* ideology, which parallels the structural attribution described by Feagin (1972) and others.

We describe these and the scholarship informing them in the Literature Review.

## 3. Literature review

Two primary areas of existing literature most informed this study. The first is the scholarship on deficit, grit, and structural ideologies, an ideological framework that was inspired by Feagin’s (1972) and others’ work on poverty attribution theory. This framework, specifically designed to assess the ideological perspectives educators use to make sense of racial, economic, and other educational disparities (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023), provided us a starting point to map the ideological positions that informed conditions to which participants attributed racial discipline disproportionality. This study is also informed by existing scholarship explaining why these disparities do, in fact, exist. We synthesize both areas of scholarship below.

### 3.1. Attributional ideologies

#### 3.1.1. Deficit ideology

One of the keys to attribution theory is that people’s ideological frames influence what they perceive as the causes of problems like educational disparities and, as a result, inform the solutions people generate to solve those problems. Gorski (2016) cautioned that oftentimes these solutions “determine the extent to which the strategies and initiatives we adopt threaten the existence of inequity or threaten the possibility of equity” (p. 380). When teachers’ ideological frames are tainted by prejudices and presumptions, the tendency might be to blame students or families for the impacts of the barriers and inequities bearing down on them—like blaming Black students’ and families’ supposed values, behaviors, or attitudes for racial discipline disparities. Scholars who study these sorts of ideological frames have called the ideological underpinning of the tendency to attribute disparities to supposed deficiencies within the identity group most negatively impacted by those disparities *deficit ideology* (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Sleeter, 2004). Deficit ideology is the ideological frame that leads people to adopt individualist attributions and reject structuralist attributions for societal disparities.

Deficit ideology has racist roots dating back to the 1600s (Valencia, 2010). It is interwoven with meritocratic ideologies that suggest that everyone has an equal chance to succeed within existing sociopolitical structures if they work hard enough, so that if a student does not succeed by mainstream standards like test scores, this becomes evidence that they did not play by the rules or work hard enough (Davis & Museus, 2019). Applied in educational contexts, people who embrace a deficit ideology tend to believe that educational racial disparities are the result of internal deficiencies (i.e. limited intellectual and linguistic abilities, lack of motivation and dedication, problematic behavior) in students

and families of color (Valencia, 2010). If data show that Black students are suspended more than other students, the educator with the deficit ideology would tend to instinctively attribute that disparity to the behaviors, mindsets, values, or attitudes of Black students, then look for solutions that involve adjusting those perceived behaviors, mindsets, values, or attitudes (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023). Adherents to deficit ideology might also blame students' home environments or communities for their challenges (McKay & Devlin, 2016). *If only Black students learned discipline at home*, deficit ideology might say. The practical trouble with deficit ideology is that it obscures the impacts of racial and other inequity, so that instead of addressing racial bias and institutional racism that are the actual causes of racial discipline disparities, schools offer students ways to adjust to or cope with the bias and institutional racism, such as mindfulness exercises or positive behavior incentives (Fergus, 2021).

### 3.1.2. Grit ideology

Adherents of grit ideology may recognize the structural barriers associated with racism and other forms of oppression that are obscured by deficit ideology. However, rather than working to eliminate these barriers, their proposed strategies are based on the presumption that if we bolster the grit of students who are marginalized, they will be able to overcome the barriers. In this sense, grit ideology is the cousin of deficit ideology (Kohn, 2014); it still leads its adherents to solutions that are focused on adjusting something about people who are marginalized rather than eliminating the conditions that marginalize people.

Speaking to the overlaps between deficit and grit ideology, Kohn (2014) cautioned against the danger of grit ideology, attributing "a student's underachievement to personality deficits like laziness. This reinforces the idea that individual effort determines outcomes" (p. 80). Since notions of grit and resilience became a popular focus for responding to achievement disparities in education (Tough, 2013), scholars have pointed out the tendency to mistake grit-fortifying initiatives as equity initiatives based on the notion that they help students to overcome whatever barriers to learning and engagement they might be facing (Love, 2019). In a sense, racial equity scholars have argued, grit has become a sort of racial equity workaround (Gorski, 2019) and a very specific and very popular offshoot of already-common deficit responses to disparities. Its underlying ideology is based on the notion that educational racial disparities are the result of shortages of grit and resilience in students and communities of color. As with deficit ideology, through a grit ideology academic and other disparities are attributed to a personal trait, ignoring structural or institutional challenges students experience, like racist applications of policies (Goodman, 2018). That is why Slater (2022) concluded that it "only serves to rationalize the injustice of the social reproduction of precarity and insecurity" (p. 5).

### 3.1.3. Structural ideology

People who adopt a structural ideology understand educational and other disparities as outcomes of inequity and injustice—of structural or institutional conditions that shape people's levels of access and opportunity (Bastias et al., 2024; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023). In the case of poverty attribution, scholars often associated structural barriers with conditions like wealth inequality, the scarcity of living wage work, unstable housing, and other concerns that undermined some people's possibilities for escaping poverty (Bastias et al., 2024). If we examine parallel conditions in a school context, we might observe as Berliner (2013) and others have observed, how educational opportunities are informed by income and wealth. At the most basic level, students experiencing poverty are more likely than their wealthier peers to experience food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, limited access to professional tutoring, and a lack of high-quality early childhood education and childcare (Buchmann et al., 2010; Milner et al., 2015).

Scholars who use a structural lens to examine racial disparities focus first and foremost on the institutionalized and structural racism largely obscured by deficit or grit lenses. These might include conditions outside

of schools that affect students' educational outcomes—racism in housing, employment, and healthcare systems, for example (Brown & Homan, 2024; Dickerson, 2021; Furtado et al., 2023). If we look, again, in schools, we find similarly troubling perpetuations of structural racism through a variety of mechanisms, such as racist tracking practices (McCardle, 2020) and the focus of this study, racist discipline practices (Little & Welsh, 2022). Proponents of structural ideology recognize that as long as structural and institutional inequities exist, educational outcome disparities will exist (Gorski, 2016). Unfortunately, as Gorski (2016) noted, teachers and schools often are not equipped with the knowledge or resources to resolve these inequities, so the tendency is to embrace the practical solutions generated by a grit or deficit mindset, like instilling in families the value of education, cultivating resilience in students.

### 3.2. The disproportionality of exclusionary practices

Over the last forty years, schools' use of exclusionary discipline—especially suspension and expulsion—increased by nearly 50% (Owens, 2020). These exclusionary tactics disproportionately affect Black students (Heilbrun & Cornell, 2015; Johnston et al., 2014). The Government Accountability Office (2018) has confirmed these findings: Black students are 3.2 times more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled.

Educators and education scholars historically have embraced a wide range of beliefs about why racial discipline disparities exist, representing an equally wide range of ideological positions. Common explanations include cultural mismatches between students and teachers (e.g., Gregory et al., 2010), presumed higher rates of instability in the homes of students of color (e.g., Hinojosa, 2008), and/or systemic racism (e.g., Urdan & Bruchmann, 2018). However, as Girvan et al. (2019) pointed out, studies continue to show that racial discipline disproportionalities "persist even when controlling for student characteristics and behavior" (p. 41). As we mentioned earlier, studies show that Black students do not misbehave more or in more serious ways than their classmates (Huang, 2016).

The issue is not students or their behaviors. So, what causes racial discipline disparity, and in particular disproportionality in exclusionary discipline experienced by Black students? Researchers have begun to home in on core causes. For example, Okonofua et al. (2015) found in a controlled experiment using hypothetical vignettes of student misbehaviors that teachers viewed the behavior of Black students as indicative of a long-term problem and deserving of suspension even when white students displayed the same behavior. Decades of research has, in fact, shown that Black males are more likely than other students to be suspended for relatively minor disciplinary infractions and to incur more severe penalties for minor misconduct (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Petras et al., 2011). Many behaviors for which Black students are disciplined disproportionately are ambiguous and highly contextual—behaviors like disrespect, insubordination, or noisiness (Heilbrun & Cornell, 2015; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Skiba et al. (2002) found that white students were more likely disciplined for objective offenses (e.g., smoking), whereas Black students were often disciplined for these sorts of subjective offenses.

This is where racial bias comes in. Adults in schools must *interpret* subjective behaviors, which are more ambiguous than objective behaviors. Staats (2015–2016) pointed out that implicit bias flourishes in ambiguous situations, while Ogletree et al. (2012) noted that when teachers address disciplinary issues, "their background experiences and automatic associations shape his or her interpretation of the scene" (p. 53). Relying on presumptions, stereotypes, and social conditioning, teachers and administrators may evaluate ambiguous evidence of school violations in racially biased ways (Ogletree et al., 2012). Researchers have begun to connect racial bias and stereotyping beliefs among educators to the everyday discipline decisions that result in racial disparities (Kunesh & Noltenmeyer, 2019). As educators misperceive more and

harsher instances of misbehavior among Black students, some adults in schools may come to believe that the best way to deter it is by using harsh, exclusionary school punishments (Ispa-Landa, 2018). Mix this hyper-punitive approach with racial bias, and racial discipline disparities are inevitable.

This is not merely speculative. It bears out in localized and national studies of racial discipline disparities. Analyzing statewide administrative data on individual disciplinary infractions in North Carolina, for example, Shi and Zhu (2022) found that Black students are 0.4% more likely to be suspended than white peers and receive suspensions that average 0.05 days longer than white peers for the same behaviors. The researchers attributed these disparities to racial bias, specifying that “racial disparities are unlikely to be driven by differences in behavior” (par. 1); the problem, instead, was bias in the interpretation of and responses to student behavior depending on race. Nationally, Girvan et al., (2017), who reviewed office discipline referral records for more than one million students across more than 1800 US schools, found that the primary cause of racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline came down to racial variances in who adults referred to the office for discipline for *subjective* behaviors.

Researchers and civil rights groups have called attention to the racial disparity in disciplinary practices (Gregory et al., 2011; Petras et al., 2011), warning that it constitutes a violation of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (U.S. Department of Justice & USDOE, 2014), which prohibits racial discrimination in schools. Moreover, these exclusionary practices have been associated with short-term and long-term negative outcomes such as loss of instruction, poor school performance, and higher risks of school dropout, arrest, incarceration, and unemployment. These punitive policies widened the racial gap in suspension and expulsion (Mittleman, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2016; Owens, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Balfanz et al. (2013) pointed out that 73% of students suspended in 9th grade in a study conducted in Florida failed subsequent academic courses, compared to 36% of students who were not suspended; moreover, being suspended even once in 9th grade is associated with a 20% increase in dropping out. Similarly, academic disengagement was associated to truancy: feeling academically disengaged, students may abandon school (Owens, 2020; Toldson et al., 2013).

Racial discipline disparities have impacts outside of schools, too. Researchers have linked suspension to the criminal justice system: more than one third of males suspended for 10 or more days had been confined in a correctional facility in their twenties (Shollenberger, 2015). Similarly, Fabelo et al. (2011) found that suspension and expulsion tripled students' likelihood of juvenile justice contact within the subsequent year. Youth who are placed in correctional facilities are more likely to engage in criminal behavior in the future, compared to youth who remain in the community under supervision (Loughran et al., 2009). For example, incarcerated youth had a 70–80% recidivism rate within two to three years of release (Mendel, 2011).

If educators and educational leaders fail to correctly understand the core causes of racial discipline disparities, and particularly to let go of deficit-oriented explanations related to Black students' cultures, mindsets, and attitudes, then it will be impossible for them to formulate meaningful solutions to the problem (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023). This is why we, as people who prepare future educators, found it useful to map out their perceptions and to consider them against ideological attribution frames.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Context and participants

The participants were fifty-four undergraduate students (81% female and 68% white) enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a mid-sized university in the southeastern United States. These preservice teachers (hereon PST) had an average age of 23.1 years. These demographics are typical of students enrolled in teacher education

programs. Most of the students had taken a diversity course (74%) and all participants were taking a classroom management course at the time this research was conducted. Of those who disclosed their political affiliations, 37% were democrats, 13% were republicans, 37% had other political affiliations, and 13% had no political affiliation.

### 4.2. Measures and procedures

We utilized a participant survey that contained factual statements related to racial disparities in schools. Each statement was followed by 2 questions. For example, the participants were presented with the following facts: 1) Black students are expelled/suspended at higher rates than their white counterparts, 2) Black students are overrepresented in special education programs and underrepresented in gifted programs, and 3) Black and Latina/o/e teachers leave teaching careers more quickly on average than white teachers. The participants were asked to respond in short answer form why they thought each disparity existed, and how they felt each disparity should be addressed. For the purpose of this study, we focused on responses to the first fact.

This instrument, along with a demographic questionnaire, was administered at the end of the semester in which the participants were enrolled in a Classroom Management and Communications course. This course was purposefully selected, as it incorporated readings, discussions, and assignments related to social justice and equity concerns.

To ensure that ethical considerations were followed, as one of the authors taught the students in 4 of the 6 sections of the course where data were collected over the span of two years (Fall 2021-Fall 2023), the participants in the four sections were recruited after grades had been posted. At the end of the semester, the researcher emailed all her students, communicating her intent for this study and informing them about voluntary participation. She further explained that participants would not be compensated for their time, and that their real names would not be used in the study to ensure confidentiality. In the course sections in which the researcher was not the course instructor, after obtaining permission of the course instructor, the researcher visited these classes, explained the study and encouraged students who wished to become participants to share their names and email addresses. A week after the class visit, the researcher contacted all the students who wished to participate in the study, emailing them the survey and establishing the end of the semester as a deadline.

### 4.3. Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, this study is based on an analysis of the data we collected in response to the first question: *Why do you think Black students are suspended or expelled at higher rates than white students?* Using this historical continuum as a base, the authors have added to the three branches (cultural deficit, interpersonal racism, and institutional racism), two other components, that are placed in-between these three main branches, namely: cultural deficit based on structural interpretation, and lack of cultural understanding (See Fig. 1).

The researchers placed the data on the continuum, which was comprised of five branches: cultural deficit, cultural deficit based on structural interpretation, lack of cultural understanding, interpersonal racism, and structural racism.

We used thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns from the data. The overall interpretation of the data refers to the “researcher's understanding of the participants' understanding of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2009, pp. 22–23). In this study, and in alignment with common thematic analysis protocol, we conducted three rounds of coding.

To ensure investigator triangulation, the researchers first coded the data individually; this open coding generated four major data categories. In the second and third rounds the researchers conducted axial coding, breaking down the core categories into sub-categories and relating codes to each other. The researchers communicated via email,

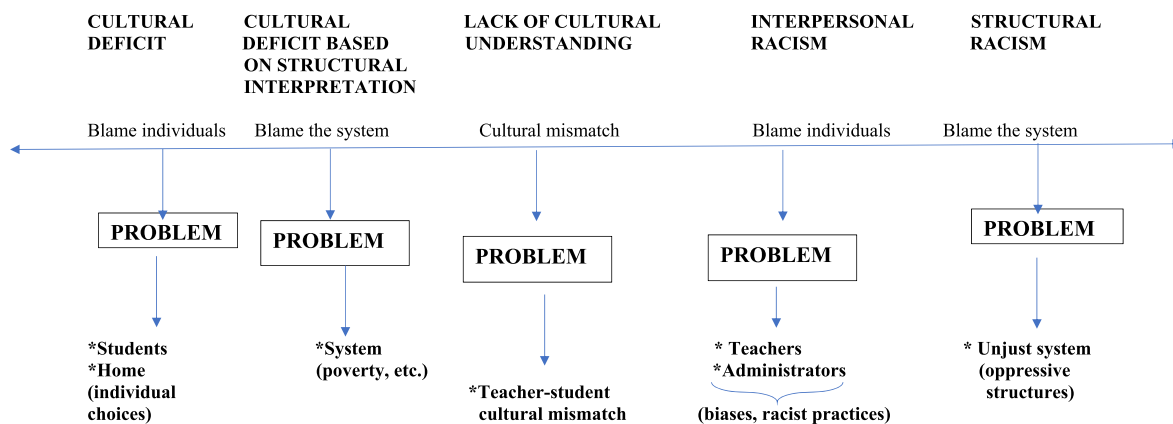


Fig. 1. Ideological continuum.

as well as met on Zoom various times to corroborate the findings and to mutually decide on the final themes. This process helped us identify four such themes—the things to which participants attributed the fact that Black students are suspended or expelled at higher rates than other students: 1) educators’ deficit views; 2) educators’ lack of cultural understanding; 3) educators’ biases and stereotypes; and 4) structural and institutional racism.

4.4. Positionality statements

The first author is a White, heterosexual, female, college professor in the US. Prior to moving to the US, the author taught at the middle school and college level in Romania, where the majority of students were part of the dominant group (White Christian Orthodox). It was not until the author moved to the US that she worked in diverse settings and taught diverse students that she learned about some of the challenges her minoritized students have experienced with prejudice, racism, and biases. Moreover, once in the US, the author was no longer a member of the predominant group, experiencing instances of discrimination and biases as an immigrant. These experiences played a key role in generating her strong interest in advocacy and social justice.

The co-author is a White heterosexual cisgender male former professor and current author and educational services consultant. He has lived and worked in racially diverse contexts. With the exception of minor forms of ableism, he has experienced very little oppression.

We recognize that our positionality (i.e., groups membership) influences our ideological stand, individual perceptions, and experiences (Tanase, 2022). Our group membership (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and class) and the subjectivity (e.g., values and cultural background) also affect the research process and help us realize partial perspectives and biases in our research (Kayaalp, 2020).

4.5. Study trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers followed 3 of Guba’s (1981) general constructs: credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility, or internal validity, seeks to answer the question: “How congruent are the findings with reality?” (Merriam, 2009). While credibility can be established in qualitative research in a variety of ways, in this study, the researchers ensured credibility by: 1) adopting a well-established research method, that of thematic analysis (Shenton, 2004); 2) being familiarized with the culture of the participating organization before data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)—one of the researchers worked at the institution in which the data were collected, ensuring prolonged exposure with the culture of the institution and its participants; 3) investigator triangulation (we separately coded the same data, determined our level of agreement on coding, and discussed areas of disagreement (Denzin, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)); 4)

considering our background, qualifications and experience as researchers in relation to the topic of study (Patton, 1990)— both investigators are established researchers in their field.

Secondly, transferability infers that patterns and descriptions from one context may be applicable to another. In this study, transferability was accomplished by informing the reader about: 1) information on the institution and program from which participants came; 2) information about the nature and the number of the study participants; 3) the data collection methods that were employed; and 4) the time period over which the data were collected. Lastly, dependability is the trust in trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, dependability was achieved by 1) describing in detail the research design and its implementation, and 2) by the researchers anticipating review by peer(s), causing the researchers to be careful with what is recorded as fact and what is set aside as researchers’ interpretive comments about the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5. Findings

Our study revolved around how students responded to this question: Why do you think Black students are suspended or expelled at higher rates than white students? While we expected our participants would provide different answers to this question, we found that their responses fell all over the ideological continuum, as some attributed educational disparities to supposed deficiencies in students’ cultures or communities, others to a lack of teachers’ understandings of their students’ cultures or to individual biases, and yet others to structural and institutional racism. The four categories below are presented in Table 1.

5.1. Educators’ deficit views

Teachers who adopt a deficit view hold their students, their students’ families, and the environment where students grow responsible for their challenges (e.g. limited intellectual abilities, lack of motivation,

Table 1  
Attributions of educational disparities.

Educators’ deficit views	Blame the victim (blame the students)	Blame the environments	
Educators’ lack of cultural understanding	Cultural disconnect		
Educators’ biases and stereotypes	Unintended biases	Confirmation biases	Open biases
Structural and institutional racism	Structural racism	Institutional racism	

problematic behavior). The responses of the participants who held deficit views were placed at the left extreme of the ideological continuum (see [Image 1](#)).

Some of the participants of this study held a deficit view, adopting a blame the victim mentality, believing that students lack the determination and motivation to do better in school; in turn, they misbehave in school, because their families do not discipline them, and because they lack positive role models. On the other hand, other participants adopted a slightly different view: they acknowledged the fact that students misbehaved at school, but they justified this in the light of structural inequities (eg. poverty, family circumstances, teachers' unfair treatment).

### 5.1.1. Blame the victim mentality

Some participants attributed the disparity in suspension/expulsion rates to the students' households and upbringing and how they shape students' personality and behavior. Participants who attributed disciplinary problems to students' home lives cited a lack of positive role models and problematic aspects of children's upbringing. For example, PST#2 commented: "... it is important to note that students may be acting out and seeking attention, even if it is negative attention from teachers. They may also be from a family with unstable relationships or not have role models." Similarly, PST#30 blamed student upbringing for their school behavior, attributing problematic behaviors to dysfunctional homes, in which students are exposed to unstable relationships.

Moreover, some participants believed that students did not value education. As such, PST#6 explained that Black students "do not hold school as a top priority," and thus they "get more punishments in school for it." In addition, PST#2 linked student misbehavior to attention seeking: "students who believe they are not valued may act out in order to be seen by someone, even if the attention is negative," or to a lack of self-efficacy: "If students believe they are not valid as they are, they may seek validation from others. Validation-seeking behavior may push students to engage in dangerous or unlawful behaviors to fit in with a group of people or to be told they are brave for doing the dangerous act."

### 5.1.2. Deficit views based on structural interpretation

While holding students responsible for disciplinary issues, some participants justified this in the light of structural inequities such as poverty, family circumstances, lack of positive representation in the curriculum, or unfair treatment by those in position of authority. Students who grow up in poverty are forced to take on adult responsibilities. As PST#9 explained, "My students [at twelve to thirteen years old] are helping their parents raise their siblings, staying home from school, or wearing the same dirty clothes repeatedly because their parents can't afford to buy them more than one outfit ..." This participant concluded: "when students experience "these types of very adult issues ... being well behaved or paying attention at school could be lower on their list of priorities."

Similarly, PST#11 reflected that due to systemic racism, "Black families tend to work longer and harder hours than white families. Students step in to take care of their siblings and to help contribute for the income of the family by working." When this happens, "school has to be put on the back burner because they have more important things to take care of." When students are truant, they end up being expelled from school. PST#29 echoed that difficult family and financial circumstances may lead to misbehavior, which results in a higher rate of suspension or expulsion of Black students. In addition, PST#22 believed that students who grow up in poverty experience feelings of hopelessness. When constantly misjudged by their teachers, students feel like giving up, because: "what is the point in trying to have respect for teachers or other people who treat them like criminals?" (PST#13).

Lastly, PST#2 attributed this disparity to a lack of positive representations in the curriculum: "Growing up, I never read any books where the main character was Black, and now that I've grown up, I have to intentionally look for books that feature characters that are of a different

race." Reflecting on the significance of having good role models, this participant concluded: "Positive role models and representation shows students that they can succeed and be valid and valued, just as they are .... By taking away positive representation and good role models for students, teachers are almost promised a challenge to educate and nurture that student within the classroom environment."

Lastly, others explained that Black students are raised to not respect authority; this happens because "Black families who feel wronged by the justice system have no respect for anyone affiliated" and in turn, "children also do not have respect for authority" (PT#6).

Similarly, PST#13 discussed how Black families' lack of respect for authority rubs on their children: "most colored people can be disrespectful or rude because they are so used to being unfairly judged that they lose faith in humanity, therefore what is the point in trying to have respect for teachers or other people who treat them like criminals?" (We did note PST#13's use of the pejorative term "colored people" which could, itself, be emblematic of racial ignorance in the best case or a racist ideology.)

### 5.2. Educators' lack of cultural understanding

Some participants attributed the discipline disproportionality to teachers' lack of cultural understanding, which leads to an unforgiving perspective that punishes Black students. Teachers who do not understand (nor they care to understand) their students' cultures, punish students for behaving in ways that do not align with the teacher's culture. The responses of the participants who attributed educational disparities to a lack of cultural understanding were placed in the middle of the ideological continuum (see [Image 1](#)).

This is an example of lack of cultural understanding: "Black hair is rich in history and it requires a strict hair care regimen. An afro, braids, or twists are beautiful hairstyles that take time and skill to pull off, yet white culture punishes these hairstyles, claiming it's against dress code" (PST#2). Similarly, PST#4 identified dress code violations as the reason for severe disciplinary actions, as "the clothing style of students plays a role in how they are treated ... students who display more creative styles may be reprimanded more."

Present this cultural disconnect between white teachers and their Black students, teachers have little tolerance for their students. PST#7 believed that white teachers do not try to see things from their students' perspectives and punish them for behaving in ways that do not align with the teacher's culture: "when teachers don't educate themselves on the background of their students, these cultural differences can be interpreted as disrespectful." Similarly, PST#37 believed this disparity occurred "because the white teachers do not understand the Black community and their culture. So, when they are met with an issue, the easiest way to deal with it is punitive action." PST#43 further explained that while "the white teacher and white students have their life experience and perceptions in common ... for the Black students, the teacher can be more cold-minded because it seems weird and problematic to him/her."

Other participants associated this lack of cultural understanding with teachers' misinterpretations of disrespectful behaviors, as PST#15 explained: "Not being educated on their students' cultures can lead to not understanding cultural norms that differ from their own, and this may be perceived as disruption, or disrespectful misbehavior," while other participants believed that "some teachers think that students of color are loud, disrespectful, or just rude even when they're not" (PST#19). On the same note, PST#41 commented: "Black students are punished for doing something that is acceptable in their culture, but not in the culture of their white teachers." Similarly, PST#25 and PST#38 reflected on how different forms of expression (i.e. being loud when excited) may get Black students in trouble. As PST#38 explained, this "often leads to misunderstandings that are interpreted as misbehavior." PST#39 concluded that the lack of multicultural education (i.e. lack of integration of Black history, positive representation in the curriculum)

leads to biases towards Black students. In addition, PST#31 discussed the difficulty to staff schools located in areas with a large African American population and to find “administrators and teachers that care about and connect deeply with students from various backgrounds.” Perhaps PST#23 offered the most note-worthy conclusion when stating that “the teachers are lacking relationships with minority students because they are failing to reach them and create a relationship.”

### 5.3. Educators' biases and stereotypes

Teacher biases play a big role in the educational disparity of students of color. These beliefs impact the teacher-student interaction, as prior experiences may cloud teachers' judgment. Teachers who hold racialized biases and stereotypes about Black students may punish them more often and more harshly than they do white students, they show less grace and have less patience for Black students. The responses of the participants who attributed educational disparities to educators' biases and stereotypes were placed towards the right extreme of the ideological continuum, close to Structural Racism (see [Image 1](#)).

Many participants believed that teachers are biased in their decision making; these biases interfered in the teacher-student relationships: “There are a lot of assumptions going around in this society, not a lot of people want to speak to the students before they react to the situation. Many will say, I have experience with students like this” (PST#8). Teachers are biased in their decision making (PST#37), letting “their judgment and racial stereotypes lead instead of compassion” (PST#34). In turn, PST#27 reflected that when some teachers see Black students react in ways they are not used to, “they see it as disrespect or the student being hostile,” which leads to students being sent out of the classroom. Similarly, PST#34 reflected on how sometimes the ways children “carry themselves can intimidate teachers, whose main reaction is immediate punishment. However, this punishment may isolate the child and or push them to continue their behaviors” (PST#34).

Other participants believed that some teachers hold double standards. For example, PST#2 stated: “Faculty and staff at schools may treat Black students unfairly due to their own racist biases against students of color ... punishing Black students more frequently or severely than white students.” Similarly, PST#4 stated: “I've personally heard teachers describe students who are roughhousing with peers or being noisy in different ways. White students may be told to quiet down and use their inside voices, but adults use terms such as ratchet or hoodlum behavior when addressing Black students.” In addition, PST#27 believed that Black students are suspended at higher rates because of the teachers' different expectations: “A Black student could be the best in that teacher's class, and they would still have an issue with how that student spoke to them.” Furthermore, this participant stated that the way white (older) teachers were taught to handle the classroom “did not factor in Black, Indigenous, or other students of color.” In a similar note, PST#43 explained that white teachers and students may share life experience and perceptions, which is not true for Black students.

Finally, participants reflected that some teachers have less patience towards their Black students. For example, PST#23 explained that “teachers are less tolerant of Black students ... most teachers are white females and that must play a factor into why students outside of their race are being punished.” Similarly, PST#36 reflected: “When it comes to disciplinary actions towards Black students, there is no leniency given towards them. White students may get off with multiple warnings before being suspended and expelled.” PST#32 further explained that because teachers have less patience and consideration for Black students' situations and behaviors, they “do not choose to help as their first option,” and they “do not care to work with the students to help them correct their behaviors” (PST#34), punishing the misbehavior. Unfortunately, as PST#21 reflected, even in schools with mostly teachers of color, students of color are given fewer opportunities for forgiveness.

#### 5.3.1. Open biases

Participants discussed how societal biases and racism influenced the ways people perceive African Americans. For example, PST#38 explained: “There is the underlying stereotype that Black Americans are associated with crime and disorderly conduct,” while PST#40 commented that Black people are perceived to be “more violent than white people and more likely to have problematic behavior that leads to a lifetime in jail”. This societal stigma impacts some teachers' beliefs, as they perceive Black students as aggressive. PST#13 reflected that many teachers/administrators consider Black students troublesome and explained that students might misbehave as a result of “these false accusations or because they are forced to make a choice that gets them in trouble.” Similarly, PST#19 reflected that some teachers think that Black students are disrespectful or rude, while PST#28 stated: “there is a highly prevalent but very wrongful notion that African Americans students are more aggressive and more threatening ... these students are quickly labeled to be a danger to the school, leading them to be removed from the equation anyway possible.” PST#40 similarly commented: “these harmful stereotypes shape the way that administrators and teachers view Black students, which leads to harsher punishments compared to white students.” Two other candidates (PST#44; PST#48) related teacher stereotypes to how teachers treated Black students, discussing the fact that white students receive more grace from their teachers. PST#10 attributed these biases to older staff members, who “have an underlying stigma that Black students are more violent than White students,” cautioning that this underlying racism “could also be imbedded in younger teachers.”

#### 5.3.2. Confirmation biases

Some biases were confirmation biases. For example, PST#16 stated: “Administration looks for trouble where they want to be trouble,” while PST#24 reflected that “kids misbehave at similar rates regardless of race, but because teachers expect it out of the Black students then they find it, because they're looking for it.” Similarly, PST#18 explained that teacher beliefs about students act as blinders: “If a teacher has a preconceived notion that a Black student is disruptive, even if there may be a Black and white student talking, it is usually only the Black student who gets the teacher's attention.” Similarly, PST#28 discussed how teachers expect African American students to slip: “With all eyes focused on Black students rather than their white counterparts, it is no wonder why this may be the case.”

#### 5.3.3. Unintended biases

Finally, some participants believed that some biases are unintended. PST#42 discussed that unfair treatment may be due to teachers' assumptions about Black students: “They are perceived to be the most troubled and get worse punishment,” while PST#14 believed that some people may be “unknowingly against watching Black students thrive in school systems, and therefore more harshly judge and punish them.” PST#15 also mused that “these biases may come from lack of knowledge about their students' cultures,” while PST#33 reflected that these biases act as self-fulfilling prophecies: “A self-fulfilling prophecy can occur where you subconsciously look for actions that fit this stereotype, looking for Black students that are misbehaving so they can be punished.”

### 5.4. Structural and institutional racism

Teachers who adopt a structural ideology interpret disparities as outcomes of inequity, due to structural or institutional conditions that shape people's levels of access and opportunity ([Bastias et al., 2024](#); [Gorski & Swalwell, 2023](#)). Teachers who hold racialized biases and stereotypes about their Black students may punish Black students more and harsher than they do white students, and they show less grace and have less patience for Black students. The responses of the participants who attributed educational disparities to structural and institutional

racism were placed at the right extreme of the ideological continuum (see [Image 1](#)).

#### 5.4.1. Structural racism and its impact on education

A majority of Black students live in communities that are plagued by high poverty rates. PST#11 explained that Black students don't have access to the same resources as white students, which causes them to fall behind in school: "Books are expensive and they're not necessary to the survival of a family, so Black students may not have access to reading material growing up. If they want to use the library, they may not have the transportation." The outcome might be lower reading scores, which might imply that the students do not care about their education: "so it's easier for the administration to have them leave the school" (PST#11).

Because of financial circumstances, some students need to provide for their families. PST#20 sums it up to the fact that: "This country was built on white superiority and this tradition hasn't been eradicated." PST#11 explained: "there is so much more at stake for Black students. Due to the way this country is structured under systemic racism, Black families work longer and harder hours than white families." This vicious cycle forces students to shift their focus from school to helping their families, "resulting in truancy, which in turn results in students being kicked out of school" (#PST11).

Similarly, PST#17 believes that structural racism makes it more difficult for African Americans to get jobs, make money and live in safe communities. The participant further explained that African Americans are often unfairly judged and treated as criminals. This mentality seeps into the school system, where Black students are treated as less than: "Schools mirror society and its ideals and beliefs. Many POC communities are overpoliced, especially African Americans. The same goes for African American students in school, as faculty tend to wait to catch these students slip" (PST#28). Similarly, PST#40 pointed out that this societal stigma shapes the way teachers view Black students, which leads to harsher punishments.

Another cause of this disparity is the severe underfunding of the schools serving Black communities. African American students are not provided with an adequate level of education, do not have enough resources/have outdated resources, do not have access to highly prepared teachers, and lack positive representation in the curriculum. These factors often create a feeling of hopelessness: "These higher poverty rates make these students feel that there is a lack of opportunity to succeed, and less options in life" (PST#22).

PST#47 further explained that when Black students attend underfunded schools, their education suffers: "Schools that have a higher percentage of Black kids tend to get less money, which can cause the quality of teaching to go down." Similarly, PST#1 explained: "Students who come from lower income environments are not provided adequate education. This comes from outdated materials, unprepared educators, unhealthy school environments." In these schools, which lack structure and quality, students tend to be neglected (PST#49). Similarly, PST#13 reflected that "These students do not have the resources, support and proper guidance most times ... The truth is white students have privilege."

Moreover, schools located in areas with a large African American population are constantly faced with staffing issues, struggling to find administrators and teachers who can connect with diverse students, as PST#31 explained: "Many prospective teachers consider current school ratings such as test scores and graduation rate, which are both negatively influenced by larger rates of suspension and expulsion." Even more so, the students are faced with a lack of positive representation in the curriculum and in the schools: "Lack of integrating Black history, including positive minority role models and cultural diversity in the curriculums in school" (PST#39).

#### 5.4.2. Institutional racism: racist discipline practices

Many African American students face racist disciplinary practices. Some teachers treat Black students differently based on the color of their

skin. As PST#2 explained: "Faculty and staff at schools may treat Black students unfairly due to their own racist biases against students of color. This bias is often magnified when Black students have diagnoses that affect their behavior and/or mood, as the students are noticeably different in both physical appearance and behavior." In turn, PST#13 explained that "students are in trouble in school because of false accusations by teachers/administration or because they are forced to make a choice that gets them in trouble." Similarly, PST#17 explained: "I believe that there is inherently racist criminal justice system in place that clicks into the school system in the form of the school-to-prison pipeline. In some cases, administration takes much more severe action towards Black students merely because they are Black."

White privilege was also considered responsible for the higher rates of expulsion/suspension of Black students, as white students receive more grace with misbehavior, while Black students receive less opportunities for forgiveness. PST#4 further explained that Black students are disciplined harsher than white students for the same behavior, receiving "more negativity when being reprimanded." This is also captured by PST#11's explanation: "Black students are more likely to be accused of using drugs on school grounds. With white students, you often hear that this was a mistake, or they have such a bright future ahead, but with Black students you hear, they will never change." On the same note, PST#25 believed that "Systemic racism is pulling the focus to these students who misbehave rather than the non-Black students who behave similarly." Two other participants (PST#42; PST#46) added that Black students receive harsher punishments because they are considered troublesome, while "white students get more grace with punishments" (PST#44).

Some participants justified the racist behaviors of teachers/administrators in light of the societal stigma that plagues Black communities. For example, PST#3 reflected: "There are prejudices that people have against Black people, especially Black males, as they are often depicted in the media as violent, aggressive delinquents. Similarly, school administrators may be more compelled to suspend or expel Black students at the first sign of any aggression or noncompliance." Similarly, PST#5 echoed: "Unfortunately, Black students are faced with a negative stigma before they even walk in the classroom. Society has deemed that Black students don't care or don't want to be in the classroom, but that's the farthest thing from the truth." The participant explained that teachers begin to treat these students differently and punish them more severely than other students. In addition, PST#13 explained that the treatment of African American students mirrors the treatment of African Americans adults in society: "Most Americans hold biases about colored people and many teachers have biased thoughts about Black students." Similarly, PST#40 believed that societal stigma is responsible for the higher rate of suspensions/expulsions of Black students: "I think that systemic racism and these harmful stereotypes shape the way administrators and teachers view Black students, which leads to harsher punishments compared to white students."

## 6. Discussion

In this study we examined preservice teachers' interpretations of racial discipline disparities—more specifically, of why Black students in the US are suspended or expelled at higher rates than white students. Our findings indicate that participants attributed this disparity to four main factors: 1) students and their home environments, 2) cultural disconnects between teachers and students, 3) individual biases, and 4) institutional and structural racism. In this section, we discuss ways the findings complicate and inform existing knowledge about this phenomenon.

### 6.1. Educators' deficit views

For years, researchers (Kohn, 2014; Okonofua et al., 2015) have analyzed how educational and social disparities are rooted in the deficit



approach: “Blaming blames the marginalized for their marginalization” (Williams et al., 2020, p. 258), instead of analyzing the structural factors that create the inequities. This study confirmed previous findings; on one hand, some participants attributed disciplinary problems to students and their environments (such as dysfunctional homes, the ways children were brought up, the lack of positive role models, or exposure to unstable relationships). Raised in these contexts, Black children lack respect for authority, do not value education, or engage in attention-seeking behaviors, which gets them in trouble. The unequivocal conclusion was that when students misbehaved, teachers had no choice but to suspend/expel them. On the other hand, other participants who favored exclusionary discipline techniques interpreted student misbehavior in light of structural inequities. For example, students who grow up in poverty are forced to take on adult responsibilities to provide for families. These students feel they have less opportunities to succeed in life (Milner et al., 2015; Munin, 2012); this hopelessness leads to a lack of interest in education and/or in high levels of truancy, which results in school suspension/expulsion (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Milner et al., 2019).

These findings are alarming: several participants blamed the students and their families for their challenges, with little to no mention of structural barriers. These findings raise two very important questions: Why do preservice teachers hold these beliefs? And more importantly, how can teacher education programs help teachers shift this deficit view? A good place to start, according to Gorski (2016), is for teacher education programs to enhance preservice teachers’ fundamental understandings not only about educational disparities, but about institutional and systemic injustice such as racism and economic injustice. Such an understanding is vital, as those who have not experienced poverty or other forms of injustice believe it to be the symptom of deficiencies in the individuals and communities experiencing it. Only by helping preservice teachers adopt a structural ideology related to educational justice, they can envision solutions that can threaten the existence of inequities (Gorski, 2016).

Equally important, teacher preparation programs should refrain from teaching practices that aim to *fix the students*. These quick fixes do not work; more so, they pathologize Black students (Love, 2019). These “equity detours” (Gorski, 2019, p.57), such as mindfulness and trauma informed practices are but coping mechanisms that teach students to adjust their emotions, to modify their mindset, or to embrace grit. Rather than correcting school inequities, these practices perpetuate racism, as they shift responsibility from schools onto the students, the very people cheated out of educational opportunities.

Moreover, to help preservice teachers *fix the system*, teacher education curriculum and discourse must reflect diverse perspectives and experiences (Williams et al., 2020). For example, when creating space for diverse narrative and cultural appreciation, teacher educators should distinguish between the value of diversity and inclusion and the value of institutional equity and justice. They should help preservice teachers learn how to amplify the best interests, joys, and demands of marginalized students rather than falling into the deficit approaches that are so common in schools. More significantly, teacher educators should monitor the stereotypes they bring to educational settings, avoid using deficit language and redirect preservice teachers when they use deficit language, like calling Black students *at risk* or *disadvantaged*, and attend to their own deficit framing, for instance by discussing generational injustice rather than leaning on the common deficit-oriented term, generational poverty.

## 6.2. Educators’ lack of cultural understanding and lack of cultural representation in schools

Many participants connected disciplinary practices to educators’ lack of cultural understanding of students’ cultures and milieus. There are some strands of truth to this interpretation, in the sense that white teachers, for example, may misinterpret student behaviors as

disrespectful or threatening based on whiteness-privileging cultural norms (Monroe, 2005; Weinstein et al., 2003). They then may punish students for behaving in ways that do not conform to those norms even if they aren’t actually threatening or troubling (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). For example, the participants believed that white teachers discipline Black students for their hair (deemed as unkempt), or for how they dress. To enhance white teachers’ cultural understanding, many schools provide cultural awareness or sensitivity trainings. However, scholars have cautioned against adopting diversity frameworks built around vague notions of culture. As Ladson-Billings (2006) stated, “The problem of culture in teaching is not merely one of exclusion. It is also one of over-determination ... Culture is randomly and regularly used to explain everything ... from school failures to problems with behavior management and discipline” (p. 104). Similarly, Gorski (2019) affirmed that racial inequities are not predominantly cultural misunderstandings: “Often, we interpret racial disparities in which students are suspended or expelled, for example, not as the result of racial bias, as research shows it primarily to be (Rudd, 2014), but as a cultural defect in communities of color” (p. 58). So cultural sensitivity trainings alone do not suffice to combat racist beliefs or racist institutional practices (Cox et al., 2017).

Researchers have identified a similar challenge with teacher preparation: in spite of having taken multicultural education classes as part of their programs, researchers (Siwatu, 2011) reported a disparity in exposure to the theory and practices of culturally responsive teaching. Additionally, as these trainings are not mandatory, teachers may feel they do not need to participate (Cox et al., 2017). Similarly, Sparks (2020) contended that these training mainly produce “short-term knowledge about the vocabulary of diversity” (n.d.) rather than long-term changes in teacher behavior. Instead of focusing on quick fixes or attempting to address institutional inequities with interpersonal solutions, teacher educators and professional development providers should take a more structural approach. Sparks (2020) recommended, for example, that schools set specific goals based on institutional equity needs and integrate training in a comprehensive diversity plan that involves school staff in reviewing practices and structures that may promote bias.

To bridge this cultural mismatch, teacher educator programs should work to diversify their student and faculty populations, and to intentionally attract, prepare and retain teachers of color. In some places, steps have been taken in this direction. Yendol-Hoppey et al. (2023) acknowledged that reforms related to equity, diversity, and social justice have caused many teacher education programs to increase focus on recruiting teachers of color, due to the evidence that teachers of color are beneficial to learning outcomes for all students and for students of color in particular (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017). However, researchers (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kohli et al., 2022; Yendol-Hoppey et al., 2023) also argued that the recruitment, admissions, and retention process of “diverse” candidates often is racialized, and historically conducted without intentionally recruiting teacher candidates of color. Kohli et al. (2022) discussed the need for a shift in recruiting to disrupt racialized gatekeeping mechanisms. Recently, some teacher education programs have enacted a number of practices to address recruitment issues, such as providing teaching experiences for local high school students during the academic year and in the summer (Sutcher et al., 2019), or by working with districts on grow your own programs (Gist, 2017). In the meantime, teacher candidates of all racial identities should have opportunities through their licensure programs to understand notions like “cultural clashes” within institutional, structural contexts rather than understanding them as root causes of discipline disparities and other disparities.

## 6.3. Structural and institutional racism: shifting the ideological frame

Schools that serve primarily Black communities often do not have the same resources, the same rate of highly prepared teachers, or the same

class sizes as schools that serve mainly white students, among other injustices (Jacobs, 2019; Milner et al., 2019). Among them, of course is that schools are more likely to suspend or expel Black students than white students, especially for subjective behaviors, and often for behaviors for which white students are much less likely to be suspended or expelled (Dixton & Linz, 2000; Greenwald et al., 2009; Oliver, 2003). These disparities are the product of a broken, unjust system—one that perpetuates inequities and inflicts harm to those who already cope with the traumas of racism. Out-of-school factors also are directly related to educational disparities (Milner et al., 2019): as long as they exist, educational inequities will exist. Unfortunately, many educators, like many of the participants of this study, cling onto ideological positions that render these conditions invisible, making it easy to slip into deficit ideology. And deficit ideology makes it easy to adopt solutions to racist conditions that are, themselves, based on racist presumptions.

If there is any of hope of shifting policies and practices toward something more just, it begins with shifting ideological frames toward something more just. Here is the dilemma: many educators might see the structural causes of the disparities as outside their spheres of influence or control (Gorski, 2019). The more attainable solution might seem to be something that is within their spheres, such as cultivating resilience in students and teaching families the value of education. So, they need opportunities to practice understanding what it means to be operating under the structural conditions and to attend to consider the impacts of those conditions even when they cannot change the conditions. This requires a structural lens. There are frameworks teacher educators can leverage to do this—frameworks that combine understandings of systemic conditions with on-the-ground applications. These include culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and equity literacy (Posti-Ahokas & Janhonen-Aburuqah, 2021). By combining an awareness of the structural with the immediacy of the practical, these frameworks can help educators adopt a structural ideology and reject deficit and grit narratives.

## 7. Conclusions and implications

We began with this fact: In the United States, Black students are proportionately more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled from school (The Government Accountability Office, 2018). Teachers and administrators continue to punish Black students at a disproportionate rate (Slater, 2022). Some of the reasons of these disparities are the result of teachers' deficit or grit thinking, as they hold the students and their families responsible for their challenges. Even when teachers acknowledge the societal barriers at play, instead of focusing on ways to eliminate these barriers, they may tend toward quick fixes, such as helping students develop resilience in the face of inequity rather than dismantling the inequity.

Our study supported previous scholarship on understandings and attributions for discipline disparities. We noted implications for teacher education that raise important questions like, In a pedagogical sense how does one change ideology? Only by pushing teacher candidates to adopt a structural understanding of racial disparities, including discipline disparities do we position them to develop and implement meaningful solutions.

## 8. Limitations and future research

One limitation of this study is that the researchers used purposeful sampling (participants were recruited from the institution where the first author worked). Additionally, although the sample size is large for a qualitative study ( $n = 54$ ), it only includes US participants, so it may not be generalizable to the wider population. Ethical considerations should also be noted: the first author taught some of the participants; as a result, their responses may have been biased. In addition, the only data collected came from surveys, which may only provide limited insights

and did not allow for follow-up prompting based on participant responses. For a richer data set, other data sources would be necessary (i.e. such as interviews, course assignments, reflections).

To overcome some of these limitations in future research studies, the researchers want to conduct interviews with some of the participants, who are now teachers, to determine if any of their previous beliefs have changed in the time that has lapsed since the completion of this study. In addition, future studies might investigate the same problem in other countries or contexts.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Madalina Tanase:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Paul Gorski:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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