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How Children of Color with Special Healthcare Needs Are Excluded from School and Community: A DisCrit Analysis

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), child race, and child dis/ability status are all predictors of school exclusion (i.e., exclusionary discipline; e.g., suspension and expulsion) and community exclusion (e.g., involvement in the juvenile justice system, which isolates children from neighbors, family, and friends). The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of ACEs on school or community exclusion for children of color with *special health care needs* (SHCN) or having one or more dis/ability or chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional conditions that require specialized health care and social services. Drawing on Disability Critical Race Theory, I describe each tenet as it relates to school and community exclusion among children of color with SHCN. Furthermore, social work as an entity has a core value to support self-expression and empathy for others—particularly for vulnerable and stigmatized populations.

Keywords

Race, Disability, Disability Critical Race Theory, ACEs

Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), child race, and child dis/ability status are all predictors of school exclusion (i.e., exclusionary discipline; e.g., suspension and expulsion) and community exclusion (e.g., involvement in the juvenile justice system, which isolates children from neighbors, family, and friends). The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of ACEs on school or community exclusion for children of color with *special health care needs* (SHCN) or having one or more dis/ability or chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional conditions that require specialized health care and social services. Drawing on Disability Critical Race Theory, I describe each tenet as it relates to school and community exclusion among children of color with SHCN. Furthermore, social work as an entity has a core value to support self-expression and empathy for others—particularly for vulnerable and stigmatized populations.

How Children of Color with Special Healthcare Needs Are Excluded from School and Community: A DisCrit Analysis

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), child race, and child dis/ability status are all predictors of school exclusion (i.e., exclusionary discipline; e.g., suspension and expulsion) and community exclusion (e.g., involvement in the juvenile justice system, which isolates children from neighbors, family, and friends) (Mendoza et al., 2020). For example, Black and Latino students and students with dis/ability comprise only 40% and 12% of the Kindergarten through grade 12 student population, yet make up 51% and 25% of school referrals to the juvenile justice system (JJS), respectively (Mendoza et al., 2020). Children with a greater number of *ACEs*, or traumatic experiences before age 18 (e.g., abuse, parental incarceration, or parental divorce; Felitti et al., 1998), are also overrepresented in the JJS (Baglivio & Epps, 2016; Zettler et al., 2018). The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of ACEs on school or community exclusion for children of color with *special health care needs* (SHCN) or having one or more dis/ability or chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional conditions that require specialized health care and social services (a proxy for dis/ability; Maternal Child Health Bureau, 2020). I will use Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) as a theoretical framework.

According to Zeng and Hu (2018), children with SHCN experience more ACEs on average compared to those without SHCNs. Likewise, children of color experience more ACEs on average than white children (Zettler et al., 2018). Children of color and children with SHCN may be more vulnerable to the negative consequences associated with ACEs because their families are less likely to obtain mitigating mental and physical healthcare services due to availability, cultural stigma, or financial barriers (Rosen-Reynoso et al., 2016). Yet few researchers, if any, have examined the intersection of ACEs, race, and dis/ability and their

collective influence on school or community exclusion. I approach this topic from my lived experience as a scholar who is a biracial neurodivergent womxn with chronic illnesses and a trauma history to analyze the intersection of ACEs, race, and dis/ability through the DisCrit framework.

Positionality Statement

Related to my positionalities, I am a biracial, cis/queer, neurodivergent, and a womxn who is a large body first-generation college student earning a Ph.D. with chronic illnesses. Some of my positionalities are connected to how my privilege continues to change over time and how my past oppressions have influenced me. In the following reflection, I will offer my past and current social identities and passions.

First, I acknowledged that historical factors had influenced the trauma and asexualization I experienced; growing up, my dad and mom both worked two jobs, and we did not have money, but we survived with the resources we had. Despite these challenges, I am proud to acknowledge all the factors contributing to my story. As someone born and raised in Davenport, Iowa, by a Farmer's daughter, and a second-generation immigrant, I hope to collaborate with students, peers, and government officials to listen intently to change school organizational culture within Iowa. Humans are much more nuanced than being boxed into another's ideal when existing with being. As humans co-exist in 'being with difference,' they tend to turn inward to their power when making decisions within their relationships, consciously or unconsciously. I hope to ongoingly engage in critically being aware to engage in active Antiracist practices in the present.

As a person consistently othered from my brown identity, even within the Latinx community, I am committed to Antiracist practices while remaining culturally responsive and humble. Unfortunately, people are willing to share their discriminatory thoughts with me. In this

privilege, being an active bystander and confronting systemic racism and harm is meaningfully crucial. Professionally, I have learned the importance of ‘speaking up’ and ‘listening to others’; everyone has something to offer. In addition, I am encouraged to assimilate to whiteness in predominantly white culture daily, which does not fit my heritage. Lastly, as a late diagnosed neurodivergent womxn (i.e., ADHD), I am in a position to raise awareness of similar intersectional identities; multiracial identities do not always fit privileged identities when considering intersectionality in my multilayered experience. However, to assume that is the only possibility is a new way of transforming racism.

Furthermore, I am in a privileged educational position while earning a Ph.D. As the first-generation college student in my family, I am learning how to navigate what this privilege means for me. Growing up, I experienced racism from others' interpretations/narratives of ‘normal.’ Being biracial, for me, normal meant someone who ‘keeps secrets,’ ‘dramatic,’ and ‘aggressive.’ I interpret those labels as systemically racist and territorial of my bodily autonomy because of the complexity that I experience with exclusion, expulsion, and suspensions.

Relevance to Social Work

According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), social workers must acknowledge and instill a community's right to self-determination and autonomy, including populations that presumptuously lack the capacity to make decisions; they too have the right to practice autonomy with safety at the forefront. Furthermore, social work as an entity has a core value to support self-expression and empathy for others—particularly for vulnerable and stigmatized populations (Kim & Sellmaier, 2020). I will focus on children with SHCN because of their increased risk of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), disproportionate representation in the youth

punishment system (YPS; Alaníz, 2024), and overall health inequities (Algood & Davis, 2019; Braveman et al., 2018; Rosen-Reynoso et al., 2016; Zeng & Hu, 2018; Lanier, 2020).

The Present Study

In this paper, I will explore the influence of ACEs on school and community exclusion among children of color with SHCN through the lens of DisCrit. First, I will describe and define the theory when applied to education research, followed by YPS ramifications. Subsequently, I will examine the strengths and limits of the theory. Lastly, I will propose future directions for research to build knowledge further on this social justice issue (See Figure 1).

Disability Critical Race Theory

Annamma (2013) pioneered Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) to examine and understand the pathways that lead to the overrepresentation of dis/abled children of color in school discipline, school dropout, and incarceration or JJS involvement. DisCrit suggests that institutionalized *norms*, or informal rules based on a shared sense of common values, are based on dominant societal beliefs and expectations, and are translated into formal rules, policies, and regulations (Annamma, 2018). Policies and regulations in the education and juvenile justice systems, among other systems, privilege White and non-disabled individuals and, in turn, force children of color with SHCN into exclusion from school and community (Rausch et al., 2019).

DisCrit integrates aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 1998), Critical Disability Theory (CDT; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997), and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1993). Delgado and Stefancic (1998) originated CRT to examine the institutionalization of dominant beliefs about racism and ableism (i.e., how dominant beliefs and norms are embedded in social institutions, e.g., public policy). Danforth and Rhodes (1997) founded CDT to deconstruct institutional norms by challenging the binary perspective of ability

or disability, indirectly validating all versions of disability. Likewise, Crenshaw was interested in the intersection of race and other identities, particularly gender. She found that Black women's experiences of racism were more perpetual compared to Black men. DisCrit brings these three theories together by examining the intersection of race and dis/ability identities and how racist and ableist norms are institutionalized, contributing to excluding people of color with dis/abilities.

Philosophical Underpinnings of DisCrit

The ontology of a theory outlines the underlying assumptions about reality, human nature, and behavior (Humphrey, 2013). Like CRT and CDT, DisCrit, for example, rejects widely held beliefs that people of color with dis/abilities desire to achieve normative standards of whiteness and ability (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 12). Annamma and colleagues (2013) assume that society is shaped by the objectification of social, political, cultural, economic, and ethnic forces perceived as natural, normal, or real. These ideals set standards of dehumanization while othering and criminalizing groups of historically marginalized people (Annamma, 2018).

Scholars have found that children of color with SHCN, particularly girls, are often excluded from school and community because of *deviant behaviors*, meaning that they are defiant, resistant, or unwilling to comply with formal or informal behavioral rules and norms (Hernández et al., 2018). Those behavioral norms and rules, based on White and non-dis/ability dominance, have led to the widespread implementation of *zero-tolerance policies*, or policies that mandate predetermined consequences like suspension and expulsion for specific behaviors (Hernández et al., 2018; Insley, 2001). Yet, zero-tolerance policies are not uniformly enforced (Basile et al., 2019; Gonsoulin et al., 2012). Rather than simply examining how these harmful policies were put in place, DisCrit amplifies experiences of people of color with dis/abilities,

demonstrating that norms are socially co-created alongside hierarchies based on race and ability; inevitably, children of color with SHCN are excluded for not fitting these societal norms (Gillborn, 2015).

The epistemology of a theory aims to understand the domain of valued knowledge and what is recognized as scholarly (Humphreys, 2013). DisCrit's epistemology rejects the positivist paradigm, in which perspectives and experiences of those outside the normative culture are not seen as valued knowledge. This situates children of color with SHCN and their intersecting identities to experience harm and exclusion from society due to culture (Rosen-Reynoso et al., 2016; Magaña et al., 2012; Singer, 2012). Instead, DisCrit takes a more constructivist approach, recognizing the subjectivity and nuance of human experience, including the experience of race and dis/ability. Essentially, the theory emphasizes the value of knowledge from the perspective of children of color with SHCN, who are too often overlooked or perceived as irrelevant.

Because DisCrit also emphasizes the subjective nature of research and how power, privilege, and oppression are embedded in society, it falls under the critical theory paradigm (Humphreys, 2013). In addition to examining and critiquing culture, critical theories highlight opportunities for change through acknowledging and assessing dominant power structures (Salas et al., 2010). Throughout history, children of color with SHCN have been medicalized, dehumanized, and tested for their biological traits, which has already implemented the positivist lens (Hernández et al., 2018, Magaña, 2012). DisCrit theory takes an entirely different perspective that acknowledges power imbalances; it does not accept biological traits of people as a reality but as a social experience. Social well-being is equally valid as physical and psychological well-being because it can impact one's quality of life (Waldman et al., 2020).

Applying Principles DisCrit to Health Equity Research

Annamma and colleagues' (2013) outlined seven tenets of DisCrit that have since been expanded by Love and Beneke (2019) and Hancock and colleagues (2021). In the following section, I will describe each tenet as it relates to school and community exclusion among children of color with SHCN.

Tenet 1: Interdependence of Racism and Ableism. Societal notions of normalcy are grounded in both racism and ableism, and both are used to reinforce and uphold informal norms and formal rules and policies. Annamma and colleagues (2013) use the example of students of color being labeled at-risk, simultaneously reinforcing norms of whiteness and suggesting that the student does not meet norms of ability. In the same way that racist and ableist notions concurrently uphold societal norms that are harmful to children of color with SHCN, societal systems may in tandem enforce those norms and cause cumulative harm. For example, children of color with SHCN are more likely to experience exclusion from school and through suspension and expulsion and subsequent involvement in the JJS compared to White students with SHCN and students of color without SHCN (Mendoza et al., 2020).

Racism and ableism are simultaneously embedded in and reinforced by the US education system, putting children of color with SHCN in a particularly vulnerable position. In response to disproportionate discipline of students of color, many schools and districts have implemented trauma-informed policies for student discipline. That is, schools consider how a student's background, including ACEs, may impact their behaviors and use strategies to support the student rather than suspend or expel (Piper et al., 2022). However, few schools have considered how children of color or those with SHCN may experience trauma differently (Jospeh et al., 2020). For example, the experience of racism is not included in traditional ACE scoring tools, yet scholars agree that it is traumatic at an early age (Lanier, 2020, Zettler et al., 2018). To address

the intersecting nature of racism and ableism, schools and districts need to acknowledge their role in race- and dis/ability-based trauma and implement trauma-informed disciplinary approaches that are also race- and dis/ability-centered (Joseph et al., 2020; Liasidou, 2021).

Tenet 2: Multidimensional Identities and Perspectives. The intersectionality of race and disability within DisCrit uplifts multidimensional identities similar to intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1998). Amplifying the marginalized experience of those who do not align with norms of ableism and racism is critical when they engage with dominant institutions (Iqtadar et al., 2020). Historically, the combination of these groups' experiences is multiply marginalized in education due to the underutilization of students' self-reported feelings about teachers and school, but supportive of teacher-student connectedness (Gregory et al., 2016). Iqtadar and colleagues (2020) found that students of color perceived dis/ability as a label assigned to them that limits their opportunities in educational settings. Dis/ability was not a label that participants self-determined; however, some did acknowledge internalization of ableist views, which impacted their sense of self. DisCrit primarily addresses discrimination and exclusion in education; we don't know what this looks like in mental health outcomes for children of color with SHCN while applying DisCrit theory. Disrupting institutional ableism and racism in education will allow children of color with SHCN to form their own identity, not one predetermined by social norms. Amplifying the experiences of children of color with SHCN will inform how schools/teachers work with these students and prevent exclusion.

Tenet 3: The Material Consequences of Race and Dis/Ability. DisCrit posits that the material conditions of children of color with SHCN are dictated by institutionalized racism and ableism, such that they are disproportionately excluded from school and, in turn, have increased risks of suicide attempts, substance misuse disorders, poor mental health, and adult incarceration

(Basto-Pereira et al., 2016; Copeland et al., 2022). For example, racist and ableist discrimination indirectly impacts access to resources by pushing students out of schools through expulsion (Waldman et al., 2020; Kincaid & Sullivan, 2019; Duke, 2020). Consequently, children of color with SHCN are excluded for not fitting societal norms, forcing them into incarceration (Basile et al., 2019; Hancock et al., 2021; Rausch et al., 2019); self-determination is critical for embracing diverse identities regardless of clashing cultures (NASW, 2017). When teachers, schools, and districts exclude children from school through suspension and expulsion, they contribute to a child's risk of the negative consequences associated with school and community exclusion. Instead, teachers and administrators can choose to be allies for children of color with SHCN by acknowledging the historical roots of race- and dis/ability-based discrimination (Love & Beneke, 2021; Hancock 2021; Rausch et al., 2019), which has impacted children of color with SHCN by entering JJS (Basile et al., 2018; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018).

Tenet 4: Honoring Marginalized Voices. DisCrit theory comes with an additional layer of scholarly background; it aims to demonstrate a combination of Black feminism and disability justice to dismantle the marginalization of bodies that do not appeal to White ideals. Voices of children of color with SHCN perspectives are historically lacking from special education theory, research, practice, and policy (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Gillborn, 2015), particularly on issues that directly impact them like the use of exclusion and seclusion measures (e.g., restraints, isolation). For students to be subjected to harmful practices like restraint and isolation violates their right to self-determination; they need to be heard regarding school seclusion (Gagnon et al., 2017). Future research must determine supportive education and community practices, policies, and research to amplify children of color with SCHN voices to prevent children from entering JJS (Mendoza et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2017).

Tenet 5: Legal and Historical Denial of Rights. DisCrit recognizes that people of color with SHCN have been denied legal and civil rights and that the denial has been justified by pseudo-scientific knowledge that claims people of color have less capacity for intellectual pursuits compared to white people (e.g., eugenics, craniology, phrenology). In education, the perceived inferiority of children of color with PHCN and historical denial of rights may lead to exclusion from school and community. For example, so-called deviant behaviors, like sleeping in class or skipping class, may be depicted as signs of laziness or low intelligence in children of color with SHCN, when they may be symptomatic of ACEs for which a child needs support (Burt, 2014).

This tenet emphasizes how predominantly White educators justify excluding children of color with SHCN because they perceive those children's behaviors as more challenging, whether consciously or unconsciously. *Dysconscious racism, or ableism*, is defined as the limited understanding or disengaged acceptance of social equity and human diversity power structures that limit (Hancock et al., 2021, p. 46). These scholars developed a framework to address dysconscious racism and ableism by better preparing early educators to facilitate more equitable experiences for children of color who are multiply marginalized. The scholars propose this discrimination is complex because people do not necessarily intend to harm and can commit harm when they remain disengaged and unimpacted by the multilayered power imbalances. There have been attempts to afford children of color with SHCN the same rights as White or non-disabled, but segregation has taken a different form through suspension, expulsion, and involvement in JJS.

Tenet 6: Property of Identities – Whiteness and Ability Status. DisCrit frames whiteness and Ability as forms of property, with economic benefits conferred on those perceived

as White and Able. Children of color with SHCN, who do not align with norms of Whiteness and Ability, are seen as less deserving of goods and services, like education, that may increase economic returns. In a society where arresting children is normal and increasing (Gonsoulin et al., 2012), we must consider their socio-cultural environment (Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Students' perspective on school resource officer (SROs) involvement is understudied (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Utilizing interaction terms, these scholars found that children of color experience feelings of unsafety due to SRO presence in their school compared to their White peers. The wellbeing of children of color with SHCN is a social justice issue of the past and present in JJS and education. Therefore, I propose involving potentially children of color with SHCN are entering JJS as a reoccurring exclusionary and segregating act (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Although I respect that these concepts are social constructs, they also create children's adverse outcomes (Waldman et al., 2020). A critical social work perspective means we must amplify the voices of those who are vulnerable to marginalization, and social work scholars must share their knowledge as evidence for discrimination (Kim & Sellmaier, 2020; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018) and, inevitably, a need for cultural humility (Gottlieb, 2021).

Tenet 7: Required Equitable Activism. As a critical theory, DisCrit supports and promotes advocacy and resistance in all forms. This implies a call to action for social work regarding children of color with SHCN (Gottlieb, 2021; Kim & Sellmaier, 2020; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). For example, school social workers can address the unintentional policy ramifications that disproportionally created repercussions for children of color with SHCN for not meeting expectations for school dress codes and zero-tolerance policies (Gonsoulin et al., 2012; Basile et al., 2019). Potentially educational, mental health practices and policy would benefit from implementing antiracist trauma-informed family engagement (Piper et al., 2022),

reviewing seclusion and restraint district policies (Gagnon et al., 2016), healing-centered engagement (Ginwright, 2018), ongoing cultural humility training (Gottlieb, 2021; Greene & Tinkler, 2019) (See Figure 2). Therefore, education may benefit from power structure reflection by assessing whiteness as a property, as it is rooted historically, it has socially influenced current norms within educational policies (Love & Beneke, 2021; Skaar et al., 2020) Piper et al., 2022). Implementing, advocating, and expanding the Keeping All Student Safe Act (2020) would decrease exclusionary and disciplinary actions.

Scholars argue that dysconsciousness is embedded in authority and whiteness as property. It threatens all students' equitable and accessible education opportunities while valuing independence over interdependence (Love & Beneke, 2021). After all, children are developing humans, and one's idea of optimal should not be the expectation (Annamma, 2013; Hernández et al., 2018). This proposed research project applies the DisCrit theory by leveraging privilege to the voices of children of color with SHCN and critically examining the intersectional or double disadvantages and inequities of support in schools (Hancock et al., 2021; Duke, 2020; Skaar et al., 2020; Rausch et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2016). By this, I mean that children of color with SHCN often experience inequities, but teacher-student connectedness could be a protective factor (Gregory et al., 2016). From a DisCrit theory lens, cultural humility responses could support a reduction in ableism and racism (Gottlieb, 2021).

Additionally, these practices could be due to inability or unwillingness (unintentional or intentional) to acknowledge the racist and ableist structures impacting undiagnosed and misdiagnosed children of color with SHCN to demonstrate a public health issue. I propose to extend this research, predominantly implemented within education, to the context within JJS that may impede children's access to resources, resulting in individual-level ACEs.

Discussion

DisCrit theory could apply to the aforementioned social justice issue by enhancing children's right to education and by deinstitutionalizing children isolated for their differences; disproportionately, children of color with SHCN are forced into the JJS (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Therefore, this framework could be beneficial to building more equitable solutions to support quality living experiences and wellbeing (Algood & Davis, 2019; Waldman et al., 2020). Systemic racism and ableism are rooted in power dynamics derived from structural oppression that have impacted generations of people of color with dis/abilities. In the U.S., privilege is based on the mystification and inability to acknowledge one's power status. Payne (2004) claims that the nature of racial oppression was deliberately and effectively mystified through the term segregation; this confusion is one of its most significant, harmful, and dividing achievements. Antiracism practices will increase the dominant society's engagement with cultural roots and power allocation considering social norms (Piper et al., 2022; Singer, 2012).

Collaboratively, schools and public health systems may benefit from restorative justice practices and policies to suggest community healing by implementing health equity through culture (Gregory et al., 2016; Singer, 2012). In some circumstances, having privilege leads people to misinterpret another's circumstances indirectly or directly, unable to empathize with others' challenges. Noteworthy, privilege can change over the life course; however, race and disability are typically abiding identities. Therefore, future research could conduct longitudinal interventions in giving people space to learn experientially by acting out cultural humility (Vesely, 2017). In looking at it from only my perspective, there is a lost opportunity for collaboration in not exploring this study design. By not taking action for change, we collectively create a systemic intertwining of ableism and racism. Research can take action by informing

others that systemic racism and ableism are dysconscious constructs that we simply must acknowledge. Inevitably, we would all benefit from accessibility, and we can all learn valuable life lessons from diverse experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, despite advocacy for such approaches, theories that involve power dynamics and privilege, like CRT, are being rejected and made illegal in certain school districts within the United States. The fear of difference forces theories out of schools that support the experiences of multiply marginalized youth (i.e., CRT). I fear that dominant social norms will do the same to DisCrit theory. Youth of color with mental disabilities are experiencing exclusion from school more than their white and non-disabled peers and entering the YPS (Alaniz, 2024).

Currently, DisCrit theory will best support this social justice issue of the JJS and reintegration by decreasing discrimination on people of color with dis/abilities. Therefore, DisCrit is the next step to reduce the harm of people of color with dis/abilities because both the power dynamics of dysconscious racism and ableism must be recognized, amplified, and leveraged to support these children (Love & Beneke, 2021; Hancock et al., 2021). This could be done through healing-centered engagement (Ginwright, 2018) in JJS and including the child and family in decision-making related to health (Algood & Davis, 2019). Finally, yet significantly, implementing cultural humility practices for educators could decrease the exclusion of children of color with SHCN; it has the potential for minimizing their entrance into the JJS (Mendoza et al., 2020). Future research could benefit from exploring community-level trauma (Pinderhughes, 2015) for children of color with SHCNs, particularly between healthcare and education. I propose a call to action for social work scholarship regarding children of color with SHCN and cultural discrimination as a barrier to health equity and well-being (Gottlieb, 2021; Kim & Sellmaier, 2020; Lanier, 2020; Algood & Davis, 2019; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018; Singer, 2012).

Figure 1.

Social Issue: Children of Color with Special Healthcare Needs in Juvenile Justice System

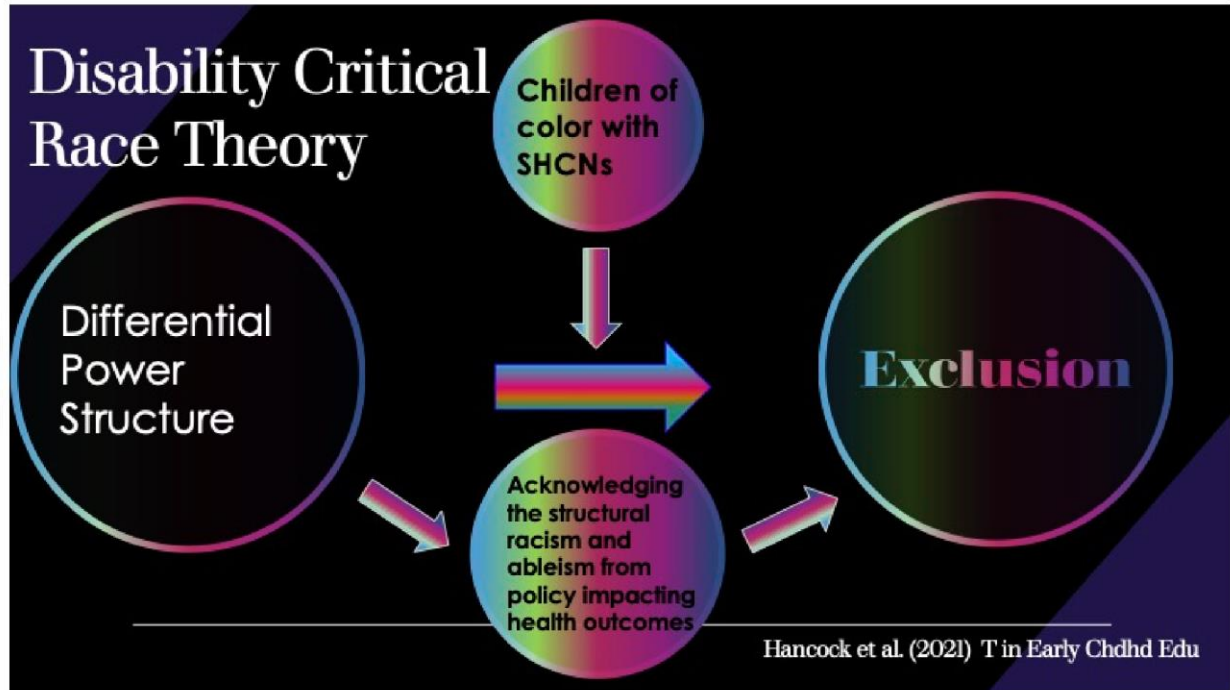
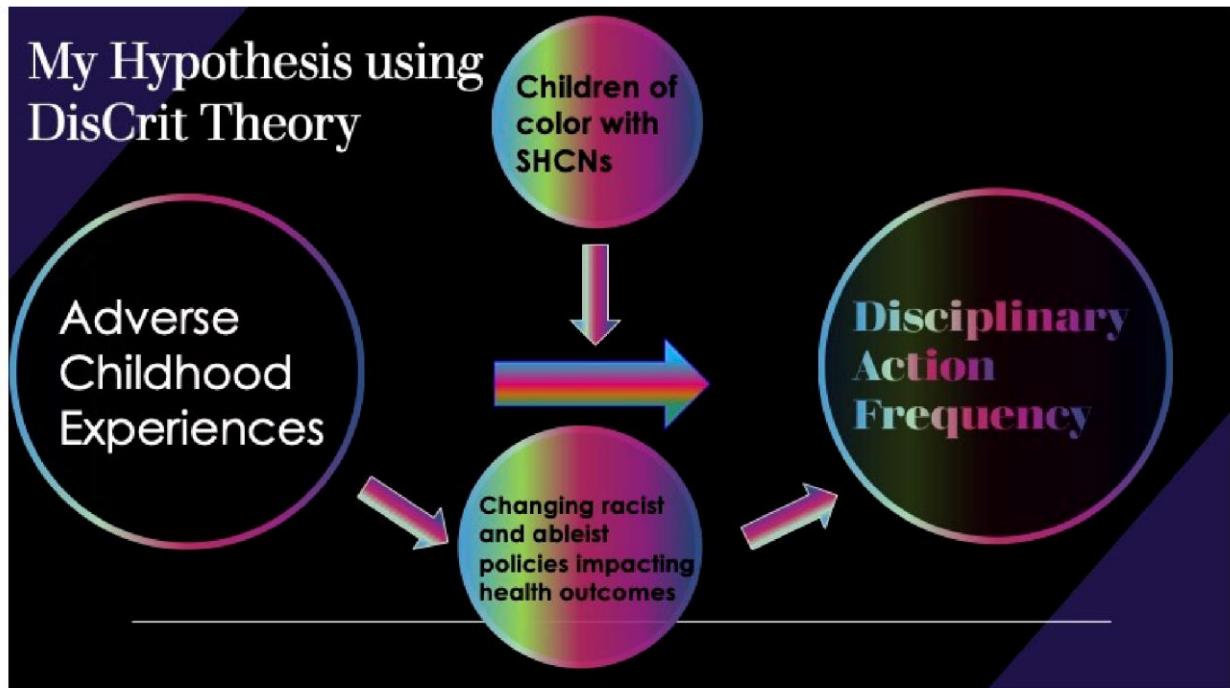


Figure 2.

Disability Critical Race Theory Moderating and Mediating Variables



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