

**Deconstructing the Power Imbalances of Academic Learning: Race and Racism in the Educational
Experiences of Black Autistic Students**

by

Ngozi Zalika Scott-Ugwuegbula

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Abstract

In recent years, improvements have been made in the early identification of autism within racially and ethnically diverse populations. However, most autism research focuses on predominantly white, middle-to-upper-class populations, neglecting the experiences of Black individuals. This study centers on the educational experiences and feelings of belonging among Black autistic people, exploring how intersecting identities of race and disability create unique forms of discrimination. Understanding the intricate interplay of the identities of multiply marginalized individuals is crucial for alleviating challenges and fostering an inclusive educational environment. Using Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and Dis/ability Critical Race Studies, this research examines the convergence of racism and ableism among Black autistic people.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Ngozi Zalika Scott-Ugwuegbula. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

Acknowledgement

This thesis is dedicated to my late grandmother, May Scott, whose memory comforted me throughout my writing. To my mother, who always reminds me that I am capable of anything I put my mind to, and my sister and brother, whose experiences and resilience have inspired me to pursue this research and advocate for greater acceptance and understanding of Black neurodiversity. Throughout my thesis, many people have supported me and guided me. I would like to thank my partner, who has been patient and supportive throughout this journey. I am also so grateful for my sister for being a shoulder to lean on during times of stress and for always being a source of strength and encouragement. My supervisor, Dr. Caso, whose guidance, support, and expertise were invaluable in completing this work. I sincerely thank Dr. Thompson and Dr. Yohani for their invaluable feedback and support as external reviewers of my document.

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Introduction

The purpose of my study is to uplift the voices of Black autistic students in postsecondary institutions, and advocate for their academic success. In this study, I investigate and highlight the educational experiences of Black autistic students through an intersectional lens, emphasizing the interconnectedness of race, gender, sexuality, and disability. I aim to uncover the unique challenges and forms of discrimination that these individuals face, particularly focusing on their feelings of belonging and inclusion within their educational environment. By employing Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and Dis/ability Critical Race Studies, I seek to explore the barriers to accessibility and advocate for more inclusive educational practices for diverse disabled students.

This study therefore seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the voices and perspectives of Black autistic postsecondary students represented in academic research and grey literature; and what patterns exist in the portrayal of their experiences?
2. How do Black autistic students experience, perceive, and cope with their educational environments in terms of belonging and inclusion?
3. How can educational environments be restructured to provide more accessible and equitable support for Black autistic students?

My Positionality

As a Black woman, with direct personal experience of autism and neurodivergence within my family, my positionality deeply informs my research on the academic experiences of Black autistic students. My brother, who is autistic, and my sister, who is neurodivergent, have profoundly shaped my understanding of the unique challenges faced by individuals with

intersecting identities of race and disability. These personal connections have given me a unique perspective and a vested interest in advocating for more inclusive and equitable educational environments. Growing up in the Black community, I have witnessed disparities in how educational systems address and support students with disabilities, particularly those from racialized backgrounds. My family's experiences have highlighted the pervasive impact of racism and ableism in educational settings and have driven my commitment to explore and address these issues through research.

I am committed to centering the voices and experiences of Black autistic people, who, like my brother and sister, navigate a world that often overlooks their needs and potential. By utilizing frameworks such as Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit). I aim to comprehensively analyze the systemic barriers these students face, and advocate for meaningful changes in educational policies and practices.

My identity as a Black woman, sister, and disability advocate brings a unique perspective to this research. My identity grounds my work in a lived reality that strives for social justice, equity, and dismantling oppressive structures within the educational system. Through this research, I seek to honour my family's experiences and contribute to the broader understanding and betterment of educational opportunities for all Black autistic students.

Chapter 1: Review of Literature

The Convergence of Identities

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”

Du Bois (2006)

Race and disability have a complex and interconnected history. However, in the discussion of our most current and notable sociopolitical issues, such as education, poverty, and healthcare, race and disability are treated as distinct (Harris, 2021). This approach ignores the ways in which policymakers have used disability as a tool of subjugation, resulting in disabled people of colour being rendered invisible in theoretical and remedial frameworks for contemporary social justice issues; and continuing the cycle of marginalization and exclusion for this group (Banks & Hughes, 2013).

In the mentioned quote above, Du Bois was not specifically referring to Black disabled students, however, the academic experiences of these students reflect the intersection of race and disability. Black people with disabilities experience what Du Bois defines as “double consciousness.” Historically and currently, academic institutions have segregated their Black students, through teaching and socializations of the dominant language and cultural norms; and their disabled students by placing them in restrictive learning environments with the intention to fix them (Banks & Hughes, 2013). As a result, Black students with disabilities frequently encounter the dual challenge of affirming and maintaining both their disabilities and cultural identities. At the same time, they must navigate an educational system that is unwelcoming and discriminatory towards these identities. These discrepancies frequently cause stress, which

individuals attempt to resolve by changing aspects of their identity to survive (Pearson & Rose, 2021).

In this thesis, I have chosen to prioritize Black identity over autistic identity to allow for a critical exploration of how the intersectionality of race and disability uniquely affect the lived experiences of Black-disabled individuals. Intersectionality tells us that a single-axis analysis of disability fails to sufficiently conceptualize the lived experiences Black autistic people face (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). To the world, Black autistic people are Black before they are autistic, resulting in their experiences being rooted in their racial identity and then followed by their disabled identity. Through the prioritization of Black identity, this thesis can dive into the historical and contemporary contexts of anti-Black racism and its compounded effects towards people with disabilities (Bailey & Mobley, 2019). This focus ensures that the specific cultural, social, and political realities are in the foreground, offering a comprehensive analysis of how these intersecting identities shape experiences of discrimination, resilience, and resistance (Shallish, 2020).

History of Autism

During the first half of the twentieth century, Hans Asperger, Leo Kanner, and their contemporaries operated with the constraints of social beliefs about disability. These beliefs impacted notions of causation and treatment, and the acceptance, role, and social status of those seen as disabled (Waltz, 2013). At this point in history, support for eugenics was quite widespread; and it was a desirable notion to euthanize children with developmental or physical disability (Waltz, 2013). The following excerpt, taken from a 1942 issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, provides an example of dominant views during the time that Asperger and Kanner began their careers:

I believe when the defective child shall have reached the age of five years - and on the application of his guardians - that the case should be considered under law by a competent medical board; then it should be reviewed twice more at four month intervals; then it should be reviewed twice more at four month intervals; then, if the board, acting, I repeat, on the applications of the guardians of the child, and after three examinations of a defective who has reached the age of five or more, should decide that that defective has no future or hope of one; then I believe it is a merciful and kindly thing to relieve that defective—often tortured and convulsed, grotesque and absurd, useless and foolish, and entirely undesirable—of the agony of living.

(Kennedy, 1942)

The predominant theory of autism adopted a psychogenic approach, which postulated that autism is caused by psychological or emotional factors rather than biological or physical ones (Happé & Frith, 2020). Researchers who were advocates for the psychogenic approach concentrated on parenting styles as the underlying cause of autistic behaviors in children (Kanner, 1943). In the 1940s, Kanner described autism as a child's inability to relate to themselves in an ordinary way, and separated autism from a subtype of schizophrenia into its own category of infantile autism (Kanner, 1943). One of his most prominent theories being his “refrigerator mothers” theory, in which he attributes to a lack of maternal warmth (Kanner, 1943). Asperger identified a milder form of autism, where he highlighted in his study of white boys with higher intelligence who struggled with social interactions and restrictive and repetitive interests (Asperger & Frith, 1991).

Autism Definition

Different schools of thought offer multiple working definitions of autism, with the most popular one being the medical model. Based on the medical model's definition, autism is understood from a deficit-based perspective, which suggests that it is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties with social communication and the presence of repetitive behavior and restricted interests (Zeidan et al., 2022; American Psychiatry Association, 2013). Unfortunately, this model portrays autism as a defect with biological origins, which is inherently

harmful to autistic people, as this definition ignores positive characteristic traits of autistic individuals (Anderson-Chavarria, 2020). Alternatively, from a strengths-based approach autism draws on the idea of neurodiversity, which believes that human neurological diversity is valuable and should be celebrated instead of medicalized and pathologized (Dwyer, 2022). A humanistic perspective of autism is necessary to move away from the deficit model of understanding differences in communication and learning. Neurodiversity allows for a nuanced understanding of autism that changes in consideration of the environment the autistic individual is in, and socioemotional, physical, and psychological challenges faced by neurodiverse individuals living in our society (Anderson-Chavarria, 2020).

In recent years, autism research has advanced, leading to an increased public health response and public awareness due to global advocacy and mobilization. As a result, we have seen improvements in the early identification of autism within ethnic and racially diverse populations. In the United States alone, 1.7% of four-year-old children, and 2.21% of adults between the ages of 18-84, have an autism diagnosis (Christensen et al., 2019; Dietz et al., 2020). Similar results are seen in Canada, where the Public Health Agency estimates that 2% of children between the ages of 1 to 17 years are diagnosed with autism (Ofner et al., 2018). Yet, most autism research focuses on white, middle-to-upper-class populations (Onaiwu, 2020; Pierce et al., 2014). Very little research examines the experience of autism from a Black perspective. The lack of representation of Black people in research further contributes to disparities in understanding, identifying and diagnosing autism accurately within this population. To fill this gap, I aim to center my research on the experiences of Black autistic individuals' feelings of belonging during their postsecondary education.

Clinical Presentation of Autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition with various clinical presentations (Yates & Couteur, 2016; Young et al., 2018). Historically, the descriptions of autism have been conceptualised from white male children, with fewer female children and children of colour represented in early clinical reports (Lai et al., 2023). In turn, this has influenced the operationalization of autism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (DSM-5) and International Classification of Diseases eleventh edition (ICD-11), and the design and formation of standardized diagnostic instruments (Lai et al., 2023). Autism is characterized by socialization deficits, such as decreased absent non-verbal behaviours, unexpected response to social overtures, and difficulties in making friends. Additionally, autistic individuals may experience communication difficulties pertaining to the comprehension of sarcasm, as well as difficulty initiating or maintaining conversations, repetitive or stereotyped patterns of behavior (e.g., repetitive movements, rocking back and forth, hand flapping), and inflexible adherence to specific routines (Mukherjee, 2017; Young et al., 2018). These characteristics typically begin before the age of three (Young et al., 2018). Clinical presentations of autism are marked heterogeneously due to the severity variability of autistic impairments and cognitive and language development abilities (Morales-Hidalgo, 2018). It is important to note that autism is a spectrum, with variability in core characteristics, onset, severity, presentation and extent of disability which can range from subtle to overt (Mukherjee, 2017).

Autistic Masking

In addition to variability of clinical presentation, many autistic people have developed a range of strategies and behaviours that help them mask or camouflage their characteristics to mimic the behaviours of neurotypicals in order to fit in (Alaghband-rad et al., 2023); And while

autism is typically conceptualized as an invisible disability (Fletcher-Watson & Heppe, 2019), nearly 75% of autistic people report feelings as though they need to mask in order to avoid being perceived as autistic (Cage & Trozell-Whitman, 2019). A fundamental aspect of masking is suppressing characteristics of one's identity and having to consistently view oneself through the lens of another. Many studies have revealed that masking can have severe impacts on autistic individuals, leading to psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and burnout, as well as other functional challenges (Radulski, 2022; Hull et al., 2021; Chapman et al., 2022).

Scientific Racism

Irrespective of motive or intent, autism is often contextualized with white supremacy and the portrayals of intellectual inferiority of other groups (Matthews, 2019), leading to skewed perceptions of how autism is conceptualized and understood across different racial and ethnic groups, creating diagnostic disparities. Such disparities are evident in autism clinical practices and research. For example, Black children are less likely to be diagnosed with autism than white children, despite Black and white caregivers reporting first concerns when their children are of similar ages (Jones & Mendell, 2020). Additionally, the rate of autism among Black children from high socioeconomic backgrounds is much higher, suggesting that higher rates of autism correlate with greater access to diagnostic services (Lang, 2019). These disparities are exacerbated by lack of Black researchers and academics working in the sciences. Research has found that individuals from underrepresented minoritized groups who are trained in medicine and science are more likely to study and care for disenfranchised groups than white researchers and practitioners (Jones & Mendell, 2020). Due to a lack of representation of Black autistics in research and literature, the images, experiences, and stories of autistic people of color are underrepresented to the public, and within the sphere of disability, in general (Onaiwu, 2020).

Media has the potential to be used as an educational tool to improve the understanding of autism or reinforce stigma and negative stereotypes of autism. A systematic review examined the accuracy and authenticity of fictional and media portrayals of autism across all media types (e.g. television, film, novels). Researchers found that current representations of autistic people remain problematic and focus on individuals with high support needs, contain explicit or implicit forms of ableism, and centered stereotypical portrayals of the autistic savant (Matthews, 2019). Additionally, many of these characters were depicted as straight white males. Popular examples of this are embedded within our culture are media representations of techno-centric intellectuals, like Sheldon Cooper from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), or Raymond Babbitt from the movie *Rain Man* (1988), both of whose entire assembled narrative represents autism, intelligence, masculinity, and whiteness (Kearl, 2021; Matthews, 2019). While these characters do not meet DSM-V diagnostic criteria for autism, their portrayals reflect our culture's stereotyped understanding of autism. From fictional television series and movies to clinical practices and research, autism continues to be portrayed under the umbrella of ethnic whiteness. In the current sociopolitical context, autism is perceived as a predominantly white phenomenon because it is defined and depicted through a lens that emphasizes its association with whiteness. This perpetuates the notion of autism as primarily affecting white individuals and encourages its portrayal as such in mainstream media (Matthews, 2019). This, in part, explains the disproportionate and delayed diagnosis of autism in children of color.

Race as a Disability

Drawing on the master's tools of scientific racism (Lorde 1982), scientists have aimed to prove the inferiority and low intelligence of Black bodies to justify segregation and inequitable

treatment (Annamma et al., 2013; Suzuki et al., 2024). Du Bois (1920) highlights some of these attempts to align ability with racial classification.

For a century or more it had been the dream of those who do not believe Negroes are human that their wish should find some scientific basis. For years they depended on the weight of the human brain, trusting that the alleged underweight of less than a thousand Negro brains, measured without reference to age, stature, nutrition or cause of death, would convince the world that Black men simply could not be education. Today scientists acknowledge that there is no warrant for such a conclusion...

Du Bois (1920)

Since the inception of America, the claim that “Blackness is like a disability” has been used as a tool of oppression. During the American Revolution, New Hampshire refused to accept ‘lunatics, idiots and Negros,’ insinuating Blackness was a similar mental deficiency, ironically by white Americans sympathetic to the cause of civil equality (Hammond, 1917). This is due to Black bodies only being presumed fit for labor, not freedom, even by those who were fighting for Black freedom and liberation. Blackness has consistently been associated with deficiency and subhuman status (Bailey & Mobley, 2019).

Unfortunately, due to white supremacy, the legacy of historical beliefs about race and ability are complexly entwined in ways that are prevalent today. For example, to be Black means to face an increased likelihood, relative to white people, of attending failing schools, being denied a job interview, being un- or under-employed, being stopped by the police, receiving inferior medical care, living in poverty, and having a lower life expectancy. These elevated risks cannot be entirely explained by income alone but can be explained by the disabling effect of Blackness (Paul-Emile, 2018).

Race, particularly anti-Blackness, has been employed to signify disability, while disability has implicitly “Blackened” individuals considered unfit. Black people have been and are still presumed to be intellectually inferior solely based on their race (Bailey & Mobley,

2018). The stigmatization of Blackness has been used to elect candidates for death and destruction. Race and disability have been used to incarcerate Black people for decades (Erevelles, 2014). Additionally, the perceived stigma of disability is an added hazard to an already vulnerable identity group (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019).

Being Perceived as a Threat

It's important to identify the ways that the intersection of race and disability creates a higher degree of risk of encounters with law enforcement. Black men, particularly those on the spectrum, are at risk during police interactions, due to misinterpretation of their behaviors by law enforcement (Hutson et al., 2022). Regardless of racial identity, autistic people can present with behaviors that may be interpreted as suspicious or dangerous, even though these behaviors are documented characteristics of autism. For instance, the story of Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old Black autistic man from Aurora, Colorado, who was walking home from the store and was stopped by police under suspicion of committing a crime. On August 24, 2019, McClain was sedated by first responders and restrained in a way that restricted his breathing. Officers claimed their actions were in response to McClain acting in a questionable manner (i.e., waving his arms and covering his face with a ski mask). In the eyes of the authorities, a Black autistic man responding to a police command in an atypical manner is a threat or perceived as defiance, and in this case, was reacted to with force.

Common characteristics associated with autism are more likely to be misinterpreted by community members and police, such as repetitive body movements, unexpected facial expression, vocalizations, wandering or running away from situations. Atypical ways of communication during police interactions increase the likelihood of negative outcomes during police encounters. Lack of eye contact, delayed response, or nonverbal response during police

interactions can be interpreted as a failure to comply with police (Hutson et al., 2022). Turcott & colleagues (2017) conducted a study to assess the needs and experiences of individuals with autism and their caregivers in Pennsylvania. They reported approximately 8% of autistic youth in their sample experience police contact, and Rava & colleagues (2016) indicated that 20% of autistic youth are stopped and questioned by police. Moreover, Crane et al., (2016) found that autistic adults in England and Wales expressed fear in disclosing their autistic identity during police interactions for fear it would lead to victimization or discrimination. Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller (2020) reported that autistic adults experienced challenges during police interactions due to their autism. Such challenges include the misinterpretation of behaviours like fidgeting or stimming, aversion of eye contact, communication differences, such as selective mutism, shutting down and not having a response, and sensitivities to noise, visual stimuli and physical touch. These behaviours were interpreted by police as aggression, deceit, guilt, or resistance instead as characteristics of autism.

Western Conceptualizations of Autism and Current Health Disparities among Black Autistic People

As research moved forward, clinicians' initial understanding of autism prevented certain individuals from accessing needed supports and hindered necessary research. This can be attributed to the harmful narrative, put forth by Kanner and other early investigators, in which they believed autism to be a syndrome that affected children from upper-class, high-achieving and often Jewish families (Waltz, 2023). In Kanner's original report, nine of the children were of 'Anglo-Saxon' descent and two were Jewish (Kanner, 1971, p.142), and most of the families were upper-middle-class backgrounds. While these demographics were related to socioeconomic status and access expert diagnosticians, these ideas about autism and its primary demographic

quickly became intertwined with one another - a misunderstanding that is still prevalent today. In the documentary film *Refrigerator Mothers*, Dorothy Groomer, an African American mother, describes her experience of trying to get appropriate help for her toddler son in the 1970s. Through the help of a friendly librarian, Groomer found out about autism, however when she showed a diagnostic team that her son fit the criteria, she was dismissed. She states that her family “did not fit the classic mold for autism, which is white, upper-middle class, and very very bright” (Sayers, in Simpson, 2002). Instead, Groomer’s son was initially diagnosed as emotionally disturbed and treated accordingly.

Despite increasing prevalence rates of autism among racial and ethnic minority youth, disparities continue to persist in diagnostic and intervention services in school and clinical settings (Pham & Charles, 2023). Broder-Fingert et al., (2020) argue that professionals’ lack of diversity in providing culturally responsive services further contribute to this disparity. From an aspirational perspective, schools should be implementing services that meet the needs of their racially diverse students, however factors such as limited funding, insufficient training, and systemic biases often hinder these efforts. For instance, a United States based national survey indicated a significant underrepresentation of racially and ethnically diverse school psychologists in the workforce. The survey found that 86% of school-based psychologists self-identify as white, 8% Hispanic/Latinx, and 4% Black, which strongly differs from the student population (Goforth et al., 2021). Insufficient recruitment and retention of racially and ethnically diverse providers, combined with inadequate training in culturally responsive services, present substantial obstacles to underserved children and families seeking autism support services (Pham & Charles, 2023).

Further impacting diagnostic rates of autism among Black children and adults is the lack of representation in research (Malone et al., 2022). The exclusion of Black autistic voices further exacerbates the notion that autism is an inherently white phenomenon; and when research only centers the experience of autism from a white perspective, it fails to capture the needs of autistic people of color and address the combined effects of racism, ableism, and systemic inequalities in relation to their quality of life (Botha and Gillespie-Lynch, 2022).

Racially minoritized groups are more likely to express a distrust in the healthcare system due to experiences of oppression and colonialism, thus impacting their social and health-seeking behavior (Gopalkrishnan, 2021). This distrust is rooted in historical atrocities such as the legal institution of slavery, Tuskegee Syphilis Study, a 40-year study initiated by the U.S. Public Health Services whereby 600 African American men were deliberately denied adequate treatment for syphilis, even after the discovery of penicillin as an effective cure (Tobin, 2022) – and the experimental surgeries conducted by J. Marion Sims, an American gynecologist who conducted experimental surgeries on enslaved Black women without consent and anesthesia (Wailoo, 2018); and redlining, a discriminatory practice where banks, finance and insurance companies intentionally refused mortgages of Black African Americans, while steering them into industrial segregated neighborhoods (Ware, 2021). The perceived and lived experiences of accessing healthcare services as a Black person are encountered by feelings of discrimination and distrust due to these socio-historical events. (Malone et al., 2022).

Historically, autism diagnostic trends for Black children have lagged behind their white counterparts (Baio et al., 2018), meaning that Black children are often diagnosed with autism at later ages than white children. This delay in diagnosis can result in missed opportunities for early intervention, which is crucial for effective treatment and support. While Black children from low

socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds face an even greater challenge in accessing timely and appropriate services, it is commonly thought that SES exacerbates the issue rather than explains it (Durkin et al., 2017; Habayeb et al., 2021). One study found that having a consistent source of medical care was associated with an earlier autism diagnosis for white children, however Black children in a similar position were still less likely to receive an early diagnosis (Emerson et al., 2016). Indicating that access to healthcare alone is not enough to bridge the diagnostic gap, highlighting the need for culturally competent care and awareness of racial biases among healthcare providers. This may also be a function of cultural differences in parenting beliefs and attitudes for Black families. For instance, cultural norms and parenting expectations influence how a child's behaviors are reported and interpreted. In the past researchers have highlighted possible cultural differences in the manifestation of autism in some African or Latino cultures relative to western cultures (de Leeuw et al., 2020). In the context of western culture, eye contact is a common characteristic of respectful nonverbal communication. While in the context of some African or Latino cultures, direct eye contact with adults is considered impolite for children.

From an African perspective, Hoekstra and colleagues (2018) conducted a qualitative study exploring the expression of autism characteristics in Ethiopia. Researchers found that caregivers often described their autistic child as able to greet others well, instead of describing it as a deficit. In Ethiopia, social greetings are ritualized and often carry great social significance. Therefore, caregivers reporting this as a strength of their child, rather than a weakness, is indicative of ritualized behaviors. Similarly, Bello-Mojeed et al., (2017) conducted a study to determine the pattern of impairments and age of diagnosis of sixty Nigerian children diagnosed with autism. Criteria from the DSM-V was used to make an autism diagnosis, and an autism characteristic checklist was used to determine patterns of impairments. Researchers found that all

the children (100%) exhibited a lack of eye contact, verbal communication difficulty, and struggled to interact with their peers. Less common impairments included object attachment (20%), repetitive body movements or atypical behaviors (26.7%), and atypical facial expression (30%). Likewise, an American study comparing Latinx adolescents and adults to their non-Latinx counterparts found that restrictive and repetitive behaviors were less common among the Latinx participants (Magana & Smith, 2013). These findings emphasize the importance of understanding cultural nuance when assessing behaviours that might be considered symptoms of autism in one culture, but seen as positive social skills, in another.

While some non-western behavioral characteristics may be perceived as atypical in western culture, they may be normative and in alignment with their home cultures (Leeuw et al., 2020). This may be due to cultures who have different expectations around social contracts and behavioural norms, which can result in some behaviours being normalized in specific contexts or interwoven within the cultural standard (Donohue et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2017). For example, imaginative play in the western sociocultural context is seen as an important marker of development (Weisberg, 2015). Typically, a lack of imaginative play in young children is a characteristic of autism, however, the frequency in which children engage in fantasy play and the degree of imagination used, is dependent on their culture (Hoekstra et al., 2018). For example, Smith and colleagues (2017) asked the caregivers of autistic children what kind of imaginary games their children play. Instead, caregivers gave examples of games that did not include imaginary play, suggesting a lack of familiarity with these kinds of games.

Disparities in Autism Diagnosis

Due to an increase of awareness, autism can be reliably assessed and diagnosed as early as the age of two (Ramclam et al., 2022; Lord et al., 2014); but research indicates that most

children are diagnosed after the age of three (Clark et al., 2018). However, as revealed by Peirce et al., (2014), Black children are diagnosed at a much later age. This investigation highlights that 72% of white children received an autism diagnosis during their initial mental health visit, whereas the percentage for the Black sample was 57%. Additionally, Black children are more likely to receive a misdiagnosis (Dababnah et al., 2018); begin treatment later than white children (Emerson et al., 2016); and are seen by more speciality service providers before acquiring an accurate autism diagnosis (Smith et al., 2020). Another study by Habayeb and colleagues (2022) discovered that higher cognitive abilities in white children were linked to a delayed age of diagnosis in white children, whereas lower cognitive abilities in Black children were associated with a later age of diagnosis. Habayeb and colleagues (2022) data suggest that relative to white children, Black children must show greater cognitive weakness to appropriately receive an autism diagnosis later in childhood.

Black children are more likely to be placed in special education under categories such as learning disability, intellectual disability, and emotional disturbance or behavior disorders (Gibson, 2022). This discrepancy in diagnostic categories between Black and white children is an indication of issues within the educational and healthcare systems. Educators and healthcare professionals may have implicit biases influencing their diagnostic decisions, leading to a misdiagnosis or underdiagnosis of Autism. Black families commonly face barriers in accessing healthcare and educational resources, including fewer opportunities for specialized evaluations that could result in an autism diagnosis. Additionally, cultural differences in symptomatology impact assessment and diagnosis, as behaviors viewed as symptoms of autism in one culture might be interpreted differently in another. Broader systemic issues, such as socioeconomic disparities, contribute to differences in diagnosis, with Black families experiencing more barriers

related to poverty and less access to quality healthcare and educational services. The varying levels of training and awareness among professionals regarding the presentation of autism in a diverse population further exacerbate the issues.

A delayed autism diagnosis often has devastating consequences relating to missed opportunities, and developmental outcomes beyond childhood (Berg et al., 2017). Research indicates that early identification of autism is critical to improvement of health, level of functioning, and wellbeing (Oien et al., 2021; Koegel et al., 2013). Early identification and intervention are essential for maximizing the potential and well-being of individuals with autism. In terms of education, an early diagnosis allows for timely interventions and support tailored to the individual's unique learning needs. Children diagnosed early have an increased access to early intervention therapies. Timely access to these therapies promotes positive developmental gains, pertaining to cognitive and language improvements (Vivanti et al., 2017). Without this, children may struggle in traditional educational settings, leading to academic achievement, frustration, and disengagement. They may also miss out on specialized programs that foster social skills, communication, and adaptive behaviors crucial for their development (Vivanti et al., 2014).

Diagnosis and Intervention Services for Autism

Timely and accurate identification of autism is necessary for children to receive support services in clinics and schools. Evidence suggests that the earlier a child receives interventions, the increased likelihood of an improved developmental trajectory and life-long positive implications (Koegel et al., 2013; Mitchell & Holdt 2014). Early interventions refer to services and supports that are provided to meet the unique needs of a child to help further their development. These services include speech therapy, occupational therapy, and sensory

integration and are designed to be therapeutic and supportive for the child, by providing them with the tools to improve independence and productivity. Early intervention facilitates better familial acceptance and understanding of autism (Jagan & Sathiyaseelan, 2016), helping educate parents on how to identify and respond to behaviours in a constructive and supportive manner.

Accurate and early diagnosis of autism was found to be associated with superior prognosis (Elder et al., 2017). For instance, receiving a correct autism diagnosis at a younger age is associated with an increased likelihood of functional outcomes later in life (Ozonoff et al., 2018). Children prior to the age of 4, for example, who were identified with autism between 12 and 48 months displayed noteworthy gains in outcomes in intelligence, receptive and expressive language, daily living skills, and positive social interactions two years later (Estes et al., 2015). Additionally, following early diagnosis and treatment, children ages 18-48 months attained substantial development gains relative to those aged 48-62 months. Both groups saw increases in the nonverbal intelligence and adaptive behaviors (Devescovi et al., 2016). In summation, the collective evidence suggests that early diagnosis and intervention are imperative in the long-term trajectories and quality of life for children with autism (Elder et al., 2017).

Western Stigmatization Associated with Autism

A community's acceptance and understanding of autistic behaviors is determined by sociocultural beliefs; and because culture and religion tend to stigmatize and stereotype people with autism, understanding behavior consistent with autism varies depending on the cultural and social background of the population (Leshota & Sefotho, 2018; Bolte & Richmon, 2019; Yohani et al., 2020). In African cultures, disability is believed to originate from external causes such as violations of customs or taboos, disruption in social relationships, spiritual or demonic possession, witchcraft, malevolent ancestral spirits, or punishment by God or gods (Sefotho &

Onyishi, 2021). Although an older study, Aguwa (1995) found that autism is believed to be a product of spiritual punishment and shame for the parents in a Nigerian community. In another Nigerian community, autistic characteristics are called '*agwu*' meaning possessed of ancestral demons or plague of parents' sins. Similarly, in a helpdesk report, titled Disability Stigma in Developing Countries, published by the Institute of Development Studies, Rohwerder (2018) examines the core drivers behind stereotypes, prejudice, and harmful practices against persons with disabilities in developing countries. She reports that religious or cultural beliefs about the origin of disability often underpin stigma. Research in Zambia, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Senegal support this claim, as it demonstrates that beliefs about the cause of disability are a result of an ancestral curse as punishment for wrongdoings of former generations in the family (Mostert, 2016; Aley, 2016). Other beliefs about the cause of disability include witchcraft or spells cast upon the families of disabled individuals in countries like Nigeria or Kenya (Mostert, 2016; McConkey et al., 2016), or considered to be a result of demonic possession in countries such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda and Ethiopia (Mostert, 2016; Aley, 2016).

Comparably, within African American communities, religion is an important cultural component, and has a symbiotic relationship with health-related beliefs (Yohani et al., 2020). Researchers have found that African Americans tend to rely on traditions and religious beliefs to influence their perceptions and actions regarding health conditions (Fennel, 2023). For example, many African Americans believe prayer can resolve illness, leading them to value healthcare guidance from religious leaders, such as ministers, over healthcare professionals (Rowland & Isaac-Savage, 2013). These beliefs influence attitudes towards those with autism, and impact help-seeking behaviors of caregivers, who often first consult traditional and religious leadership, reflecting their cultural practices and belief systems (Sefotho & Onyishi, 2021). Black autistic

people are more prone to being misdiagnosed with other conditions or remaining undiagnosed altogether. Consequently, Black autistic individuals and their families are less likely to have exposure to autism experiences, limiting opportunities to develop a cross-cultural understanding of autism (Hutson et al., 2022).

Systemic and Institutional Anti-Blackness in Educational Settings

While educational institutions offer a space for learning, they are not immune from the political and social climate that negatively affects people of color (Thompson & Pinnock, 2022). Literature examining the experiences of Black students has demonstrated that they are full of racism, microaggressions, and stereotypes (Lu & Newton, 2019; Delgado, 2023; Moeke-Pickering, 2020). Therefore, Black students are forced to exist in an environment full of power imbalances and identity struggles. Research has shown that Black students encounter discrimination and racism from their peers, teachers, staff and instructors in educational institutions on a continual basis (Thompson & Pinnock, 2022; Garriott et al., 2008). In this context, Black suffering in education is a result of deeply rooted anti-Blackness and disgust. For instance, in Florida, school officials warned a young Black girl that to avoid expulsion, she needed to cut off or straighten her naturally curly hair (Dumas, 2016). Similarly in Louisiana, a sixth grader was told that her hair violates school policy and was kicked out of her classroom (The Associate Press, 2018). In New York, a principal referred to Black teachers as ‘gorillas’ and mocked their ‘big lips’ and ‘nappy hair’ (Dumas, 2016). In Ontario, Canada, students in Peel Region share their experiences with racism from both faculty and peers. One student recalls a teacher dismissing racism as a myth and claiming that Black people were not treated poorly during slavery (Raza, 2022).

While these are overt examples of racism within the academic context, they serve to underscore the pervasive nature of prejudice and the detrimental impact they have on Black students' academic performance and mental health. Additionally, these incidents highlight the overt racism and the insidious, everyday experiences that contribute to a hostile educational environment. The psychological toll of navigating these spaces can lead to a diminished sense of belonging, increased stress, and a negative self-image of Black students. Consequently, this perpetuates a cycle of marginalization and exclusion, impeding academic success and overall well-being.

Historically, Black people have been academically harmed and victimized by racist and white supremacist educational practices through school policy, curriculum trauma, knowledge manipulation, and punitive discipline outcomes (Thomas-Woodard et al., 2024). This should come as no surprise, as the entire North American continent was founded on racism and capitalism. The use of racially minoritized bodies in slavery and exploitation to build wealth is the story of the United States and Canada. Those hierarchies did not simply disappear after enslavement, instead they continued in more and revolutionary ways via segregation, Jim Crow Laws, underfunded neighborhoods, and the over policing of Black bodies, just to name a few (Alexander, 2020). The effects of racism on Black students are devastating. A systematic review done by Ogunyemi and colleagues (2020) found that students who were targets of racial microaggressions experienced feelings of stress, frustration, and reduced their sense of belonging thus hindering their participation in campus life. In turn, minority students are at greater risk for psychological distress and substance abuse. These studies are an indication that due to structural racism, being a racialized minority in an academic institution comes with vast difficulties, causing feelings of distress, inadequacy, and ultimately impacting academic performance.

The Resegregation of Educational Programming

The terms “race” and “disability” are socially constructed categories used to oppress and segregate (Gillborn, 2015). Race, for example, is an ideological concept created as a means of justifying slavery and the inferiority of Black people (Banton, 2000; Miles, 2000). Similarly, learning disabilities have been argued to have emerged as a response to the changing social conditions of the 1950s, as a strategic move to protect white middle-class children and families from downward mobility through low academic achievement (Sleeter, 1987). The historic interlocking of whiteness and normalcy play an important role in developing interwoven notions of race and disability. The white upper class relied on figures of deficiency and disability to assert that Black people, immigrants, women, and the poor were all inherently unfit for citizenship rights. Proslavery advocates argued that Black people were deficient in mind, body, and moral character. Others argued that freeing the slaves would result in them acquiring debilitating disabilities, including, blindness, deafness, and mental illness as they were ill-equipped to handle the responsibilities of citizenship (Baynton, 2001).

The intersection of race and disability interact to negatively shape the lives of people of color with disabilities (Morga et al., 2022). Black students identified and labeled as having a disability often experience double jeopardy, a term used to refer to the occurrence of inequalities associated with living in poverty and attending insufficiently funded and resourced urban schools. Additionally, these students experience inequalities inherent to the special education system, including segregated classrooms, limited access to the general education curriculum, and poor post-school outcomes (Gibson, 2022). In addition to their disability, Black students must contend with issues such as institutionalized racism. Existing at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities results in poor economic, health, and educational outcomes.

Overrepresentation of Black Students in Special Education

Special education was not developed as way to ‘do good’ by certain children but as a means of segregation (Tomlinson, 2013). Currently, we are seeing the expansion of special education to deal with young people who are defined as unable to participate in general education classrooms. In essence, special education has become a mechanism for differentiating between young people and allocating some to a future of relative powerlessness and economic dependency. At a time when education has become necessary to gain any employment or income above the poverty level, the expansion of special education begs the question of what kind of education can or should be offered to a group of people who are unlikely to find partial or permanent employment during their adult years.

While labels occasionally have advantages, such as access to relevant resources, it is also clear that other disability labels are less than desirable. In both Canada and the United States, there is a long history of overrepresentation of Black youth in segregated low-status educational classrooms (Tomlinson, 2014). Since their inception, segregated special education classes have been populated with students from minority racial and ethnic groups (Annamma et al., 2013); and a disproportionate number of these students continue to be referred, labeled, and placed in special education, under categories of Learning Disability, Intellectual Disability, and Emotional Disturbance or Behaviour Disorders. These categories are usually classified as high incidence and are problematic in terms of diagnosis because they rely on the subjective judgment of school personnel rather than biological facts (Annamma et al., 2018).

Black students are disproportionately overrepresented in special education classrooms compared to their white counterparts across multiple disability categories (Gibson, 2022). In classrooms, students who exhibit “problematic” behaviors are first identified by their teachers

who are then referred to and further evaluated by school psychologists or counselors, who conduct disability and accommodation assessments. From there, students may be placed in special education settings that are meant to assist in providing quality education. However, this process is often impacted by implicit biases that these professionals may hold and lack of training in cultural responsiveness. For example, Black boys diagnosed with Emotional Behavioural Disorders are more likely to be educated in exclusionary settings, such as a special education classroom, or alternative schools. Once placed, it is unlikely that these students will return to a general education classroom or other inclusive school environment. This, in turn, has devastating implications for their long-term life outcomes (Bal et al., 2017). Additionally, Black students identified as having Emotional Behavioral Disorder are more likely to be involved with the justice system, underperform academically, have poor school attendance and higher rates of school drop-out. (Wegmann & Smith, 2019; Mitchell 2017).

Factors Contributing to Bias in Special Education

There are several factors that contribute to the over-representation of Black children in special education. These include systemic inequities that elevate students' risk, such as poverty and lack of resources (Morgan et al., 2016; Gibson, 2022). Additional factors include implicit and explicit biases and the subjectivity of identifying students for special education placements (Cavendish et al., 2018; Ford & Russo, 2016; Ford et al., 2017). These are discussed in further detail below.

Socioeconomic Factors, and Lack of Resources and Opportunities

Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to inherit disadvantages early in life. These children are more likely to live in environments that are unstable and have stressors that middle - and upper-class students do not have to deal with. These stressors may include

inadequate housing, food insecurity, exposure to domestic violence, and/or substance abuse. A growing body of research has identified the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) during childhood or adolescence. A meta-analysis conducted by Huges and colleagues (2017) examined the effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health in the UK, USA, Canada, China, New Zealand, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and Sri Lanka. Researchers found that individuals with at least four ACEs were at risk for many health conditions, such as mental illness, addiction, cardiovascular disease, cancer, violence victimization, and suicide. A similar study, conducted by Houtepen and colleagues (2020) explored the associations of ACEs with educational attainment and adolescent health in the UK. This study found an association between adverse childhood experiences and lower educational attainment, high risk of drug use, depression, and smoking. These factors negatively impact students' behavioral and academic performances in the classroom (Gibson, 2022). While white students can also grow up impoverished and face similar environmental circumstances as low SES Black students, white students are not disproportionately subjected to disciplinary measures that could lead to special education placement (Annamma et al., 2014; Chambers, 2019; Dandridge, 2020; Shores et al., 2020). There is also evidence that Black students from high SES environments are also subjected to an increased likelihood of special education placement (Gibson, 2022). Therefore, poverty is a contributing factor of special education placement, but it does not explain the disproportionality.

Implicit Bias

When discussing the identification of students with disabilities, it is important to consider the implicit bias that some school professionals carry into their classrooms. Implicit bias can be explained as stereotypes or attitudes that impact our actions, understanding, and decisions in an unconscious way (Staats, 2016). These unconscious processes influence our lives and

interactions with others. Research suggests that implicit bias exists in everyone but has damaging consequences in the broader context of institutional and systemic racism (Gibson, 2022). It has become common to consider the impact of implicit bias towards Black people in the context of medicine or policing. However, less attention is given to the impact of biases on academic outcomes. For Black students, the biases of school professionals can result in the over-identification of certain disabilities, which is of particular importance when applied to Black students who are being identified for special education due to their behaviors (Raj, 2016; Perry, 2022; Scardamalia, 2017).

School-to-Prison Pathway

Institutional racism is ingrained within our education system and continues to impact Black children in a negative way. We continue to see several cases of racial discrimination against Black children that impede their educational advancement. A well-known example of flagrant discrimination while policing in schools was the *United States v. City of Meridian* case in 2012. The justice system in Mississippi was exposed for aggressively punishing Black children for minor infractions at alarming rates. In this case, 77 children racially minoritized children were arrested and thrown in a juvenile detention facility for breaking minor school rules. These infractions were not violent, but disruptive acts such as being late to class, behaving rudely towards an administrator, or leaving the classroom to use the restroom without permission. As punishment, these children were placed in handcuffs, immediately taken to juvenile facilities without hearing and coerced into confessions before being read their Miranda rights. Cases like this are not unique to Mississippi, as similar forms of prejudice have been documented across several American states (Moody, 2016).

The school-to-prison pathway is a system in which school practices and policies make it more likely for a student to become involved with the criminal justice system (Mallett, 2016). This issue is compounded when a student is located at the intersection of class, race, and disability (Erevelles, 2014). This system funnels minority students with disabilities, who come from low-income families, away from a constructive educational outcome through exclusive, punitive, and restrictive measures resulting in incarceration (Kalvesmaki & Tulman, 2017). These students are significantly overrepresented in data describing the pathway and high rates of incarceration (Nelson, 2014).

Entering Postsecondary Environments

Young Black Canadians are less likely than other youth to obtain a postsecondary degree. This gap remains when social and economic factors are taken into consideration (Turcotte, 2022; Thompson & Pinnock, 2022). In college, Black students are less likely to perform as well as their white counterparts (Baker, 2013). Several underlying factors contribute to this persistent disparity, including stereotypes and discrimination, systemic and institutional racism, financial barriers, implicit biases, and belonging uncertainty (Brady et al., 2020; Addo et al., 2016). Further research has suggested that social factors inhibit Black students from postsecondary success (Hussain & Jones, 2021). For example, partial predictors of academic success can be attributed to social, environmental, and psychological factors. Social factors include lack of meaningful interactions with diverse peers and staff, and an overall lack of social belonging. Lack of belonging becomes more pronounced in campus environments that are racially hostile towards students of colour (Thelamour et al., 2019; Meseus et al., 2018; Strayhord, 2014).

Many autistic young adults are pursuing higher education (Hillier et al., 2017). However, graduation rates for these students remain much lower than those of their neurotypical peers

(Anderson et al., 2017). Low graduation rates among the autistic population can be attributed to communication and social skills difficulties that can limit their ability to participate in group projects, class presentations, or discussions (Lambe et al., 2018). They may struggle with the reduced structure and routines of university (van Hees et al., 2015), and be prone to loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Anderson et al., 2017). To feel belonging, these students may engage in autistic masking (also referred to as camouflaging), described as the “conscious or unconscious suppression of natural responses and adoption of alternatives across a range of domains including social interaction, sensory experience, cognition, movement, and behavior.” (Pearson & Rose, 2021, pp 53). Additionally, autistic students lack the support of friends (Elias & white, 2017) and may experience significant distress due to heightened sensory sensitivities to campus noise, smells, and crowds, or experience sensory dysfunction (Waisman et al., 2021; Brown & Coomes, 2015).

Through early adolescence and into adulthood, autistic students have difficulty experiencing belonging in educational institutions due to negative encounters with social expectations, attitudes, and responses (Pesonen et al., 2020). autistic individuals are often surrounded by neurotypical ableist expectations and values, which further prevents them from experiencing a sense of belonging, often resulting in poor well-being. A sense of belonging refers to connectedness, respect, and acceptance from others in various social settings (Pesonen et al., 2020). Researchers such as Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove (2013) found that a perceived sense of belonging is an important variable related to academic adjustment. Similarly, Gillen-O’Neel and Fuligni (2013) found that school belonging is positively associated with higher levels of academic motivation across four years.

Examining the Positive and Negative Impacts of Postsecondary Education on Autistic Students

When autistic students attend postsecondary institutions, there are many barriers that hinder their success. This may be because most postsecondary institutions are created to serve the needs of neurotypical students, making them ableist. Additionally, university staff and students tend to only have experience with neurotypical students in comparison to disabled students (Schembri-Mutch et al., 2023). As a result, students may struggle because of their institutions' lack of autism awareness, competing sensory inputs, lack of appropriate social and emotional learning supports, and a lack of vocational, communication, transitional supports (Waitman et al., 2021).

While autistic students have the potential to be successful academically, they face many barriers that can hinder their academic performance. When post-secondary institutions implement social supports and create environments with autistic students in mind, positive emotions and feelings such as happiness, excitement, and optimism are often described (Vincent, 2019). Positive experiences of success in university are linked to positive perceptions of transition out of school and into the workforce. Vincent (2019) describes how some students perceive leaving their post-secondary institution with optimism. Many participants describe this experience as positive. Furthermore, successfully completing post-secondary education can earn an individual up to 50% more over the course of their lifetime, and results in better health outcomes and increased job satisfaction in comparison to an individual who only has a high school diploma (Vincent & Fabri, 2020).

Young adults seek postsecondary school environments that are self-fulfilling and allow them to freely express their identity (Wintre et al., 2008). A positive learning experience is

important for college and university students as it fosters academic engagement and motivation, increases the likelihood of students staying enrolled and completing their degree, provides students with opportunities to explore new ideas, challenge their existing belief, and enables the development of critical thinking skills (Pedler et al., 2022). When autistic students attend a postsecondary institution that accepts them and creates an inclusive environment to enhance their learning, it fosters positive outcomes for autistic students (Waisman et al., 2021). Such as increasing feelings of engagement, enabling students to demonstrate their understanding of course content in ways that suit their needs and capabilities best, and reduced feelings of stress (Cumming & Rose, 2021).

autistic students can perform well in postsecondary environments when institutions implement multiple methods of teaching and learning within the course curriculum. This can be achieved through a Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL recognizes learner variability as a fundamental aspect of classrooms, and through the design of flexible materials and curriculum to provide multiple pathways for learning (Hashey et al., 2020). Essentially, UDL guides the development of instructional approaches that minimize barriers that inevitably present themselves in any given learning environment. The three core principles of UDL focus on providing students with (a) multiple means of engagement, (b) multiple means of representation, and (c) multiple means of action and expression (Van Boxtel & Sugita, 2022). These principles empower instructors to increase student motivation, improve comprehension of instruction, and offer multiple avenues for students to showcase their skills and knowledge.

Unfortunately, postsecondary institutions are often riddled with distressing sensory input. and an inherent lack of support and understanding from university professors and peers, which results in less autistic students enrolling and completing their post-secondary degree (Ames et

al., 2021; Wolpe, 2024). Vincent et al., (2017) explored the experiences of university through the perspective of autistic students and found two important themes among the students: a sense of difference and otherness; and social interactions. The theme of otherness and difference was notable throughout the participants' writing and refers to the student's self-concept of autism in relation to other people. Students describe themselves as being alien-like or otherworldly. They notice their differences relative to their peers which then creates feelings of distance and othering. This leads to exclusion within the university setting and beyond. In the second theme, social interactions, students outline their desire to develop friends and social connections while attending university, however their feelings of loneliness, nervousness, and social anxiety hinder their ability to do so. Furthermore, feelings of social discomfort such as apprehension and uneasiness are also represented throughout the literature, suggesting that an enormous burden is often placed on autistic students to conform to the social norms to fit in with their peers, often leading to social exclusion, stigma, and a loss of well-being (Vincent et al., 2017; Botha & Frost, 2020). Such stressors negatively contribute to mental health, well-being, and create feelings of isolation among autistic students (Botha & Frost, 2020). This section highlights the barriers that impact autistic students' postsecondary experience.

Aspects of Postsecondary Education that Impact Autistic Student Experiences

Young adults on the autism spectrum are increasingly attending post-secondary school (Amanda & Webster, 2017). These students often face social, environmental, and mental health challenges (Weiss & Robland, 2015; Waisman, Alba, Green, 2021; van Hees et al., 2015), because of their needs not being met. Specific interventions are necessary to ensure that autistic students can achieve success and navigate challenging social situations, effectively manage time, maintain organizational skills, and handle sensory overload (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020; Cai

& Richdale 2016; Dymond et al., 2017). This section will highlight the types of barriers autistic students often face while attending post-secondary institutions.

From 2010 to 2016 the proportion of autistic students enrolled in higher education increased by 25% (Bakker et al., 2019). However, as autistic student enrollment continues to rise, college and university settings consist of barriers that impact their ability to appropriately prepare and participate in college and university settings (Dymond et al., 2017; Vincent 2019; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). Institutions should begin to focus on making postsecondary education a more accessible and welcoming environment to their disabled students. In higher education, autistic adults often struggle with transition planning, social awareness, self-advocacy, executive skills, and campus life (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Zeedyk et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2015). Consequently, resulting in autistic students experiencing some of the highest rates of postsecondary failure in comparison to students with developmental disabilities, with a graduation rate of 39% (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Success for autistic students in postsecondary institutions is possible if higher educational institutions introduce policies to fundamentally enhance the learning environment for autistic students (Cox et al., 2021). While autistic students have the potential to succeed academically, a major roadblock to their success is that the postsecondary environment is filled with anxiety-provoking stimuli and competing sensory inputs (Waisman et al., 2022). These sensory barriers affect learning and students' educational understanding and outcomes (Waisman, 2020). A consequence of these postsecondary challenges are low university and college completion rates among autistic students (Cage & Howes, 2020).

Many reasons impact an autistic person's ability to complete their education. Identified factors include poorer academic experiences, transition difficulties, lack of organizational and

social identification, and poorer academic experiences (Cage & Howes, 2020; Cage et al., 2020). Despite this knowledge, statistics analyzing the drop-out rates of autistic people is scarce, however it is believed that they are less likely to complete their education than their non-autistic peers (Anderson et al., 2017). In general, young autistic adults are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education compared to their peers with other kinds of disabilities, such as language-based impairments, and learning disabilities (White et al., 2016).

Low levels of educational attainment among autistic people lead to future disadvantages in the employment industry. Successful employment increases an individual's financial independence and social status, and maintains a person's psychological and physical health, thus improving their overall quality of life (Chen et al., 2015). Fundamentally, employment is a necessary component of being an adult. However, it can be challenging for individuals to gain and maintain a job; even harder for those with autism. Being employed requires an individual to be flexible and social and to constantly make decisions (Chen et al., 2014). These unique characteristics of employment create challenges for individuals with autism, who often experience challenges in social interactions. Past research has demonstrated that autistic individuals have poor employment outcomes with rates of unemployment or underemployment being higher than the rate of ex-convicts (National Justice Institute, 2013) and other disability groups (Roux et al., 2015). Lack of access to employment has devastating consequences for adults with autism. These disadvantages result in inconsistent employment (Taylor et al., 2015; Seaman & Canella-Malone, 2016), and significantly lower wages (Roux et al., 2013).

Lack of Autism Awareness

From peers. Acceptance from peers and integration into university are key factors of success for autistic students, however, there seems to be an inherent lack of understanding about

autism among post-secondary students, faculty, and staff, further hindering institutional acceptance and integration (Gardiner & Larocci, 2013; Zeedyk et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). Past studies examining knowledge and attitudes towards students with autism found that, while there has been a rise in the awareness and prevalence of autism, negative attitudes remained the same and have been resistant to change (White et al., 2019). Gillespie-Lynch et al., (2015) developed an online training program to decrease stigma and increase knowledge associated with autism among college students. Results indicated that there was a small but significant reduction in stigma from pretest to post-test, and autism knowledge increased from pretest. However, while stigma was low in areas such as engaging with a person with autism, it was higher in others such as participants being less willing to engage in romantic relationships. Furthermore, even though significant changes in autism knowledge were seen, the researchers reported no significant improvements in open-ended definitions of autism. While many postsecondary institutions encourage diversity and inclusion, individuals with disabilities and ethnic minorities are not likely to be seen or treated as equal (Mattila & Papageorgiou, 2016; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). It is up to universities to create an environment that provides institutional support and encourages intergroup collaboration.

From staff. Historically, inclusion and integration have been used interchangeably. Today, these two concepts are quite distinguishable, with inclusion being centered around restructuring curriculum and classroom organization, and integration solely referring to the location a student is being educated in (Pugach et al., 2020; Sandri, 2014). To provide the appropriate modifications and accommodations, post-secondary institutions need to implement a variety of supports to create a successful experience and environment for autistic students. To do this, university faculty and staff need to have knowledge and understanding of autism and how it

presents in a classroom setting, which is often not the case. Additionally, university professors do not receive any training on teaching, which creates problems for all learners (Kalman et al., 2019). This lack of training can lead to ineffective teaching methods that fail to adequately engage students. By acknowledging these issues and committing to professional development for faculty on inclusive teaching practices and understanding neurodiversity, postsecondary institutions can begin to foster an environment where all students, regardless of neurological makeup, can thrive. This involves training, re-evaluating classroom structures, teaching methods, and assessment strategies.

Past studies (Zeedyk et al., 2019; Vadnjaj et al., 2020; Tipton & Blacker., 2014) have examined faculty knowledge of autism, and found that many professors did not have access to information about how autism presents in an educational setting and were completely unaware of campus resources offered to autistic students (Zeedyk et al., 2019). In other cases, professors had never heard of autism before and had to do their own research regarding the condition (Vadnjaj et al., 2020); and in another study (Tipton et al., 2014), researchers found that the faculty within their survey demonstrated limited knowledge of autism. As attending postsecondary institutions becomes more common for many autistic people, university campuses, faculty and staff need to be better equipped to support them.

We can teach non-autistics to view autistic people positively by educating them to have a more inclusionary attitude, characterized by knowledge and autism familiarity (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). Knowledge refers to reducing autism stigma and negative perception of autism to increase positive perceptions and interactions with autistic people. Familiarity includes personal contact with someone who is autistic. Research suggests that individuals who are very familiar with autism have reduced stigma (Jones et al., 2021). In academic settings when professors have

knowledge and are familiar with autism, it results in positive student-professor interactions. For example, a professor in Zeedyk and colleagues (2019) study describes an incident where they were able to encourage an autistic student to work with their peers, even though the student was reluctant to do so.

Competing Sensory Inputs

Sensory processing difficulties are consistently reported by autistic individuals (Kojovic et al., 2019; Horder et al., 2014), across all ages (Kern et al., 2006). There have been many studies that have documented the nature of sensory-related behaviors in autistic populations. For example, Fernandez-Andres et al., (2015) conducted a comparative study analyzing sensory processing, social participation and praxis between autistic and neurotypical students within their home and classroom environments. The researchers found that children with autism displayed more sensory processing difficulties than typically developing children, with significant differences found in all sensory domains. Moreover, sensory processing difficulties increased in classroom environments compared to home environments.

Sensory issues can have a major impact on the life of an individual experiencing sensory processing disturbances. At home autistic people can adapt their environment to fit their sensory needs, however a school environment presents challenges that exacerbate sensory issues for the student, which they cannot control. For example, Howe and Stagg (2016) conducted a qualitative study to examine sensory issues at school. The results indicated that sensory experiences significantly affected 88% of autistic students' experiences within the classroom. Sensory experiences related to smell ($M=4.29$, $SD=2.98$), touch ($M=4.88$, $SD=2.26$), vision ($M=4.06$, $SD=2.7$) and sound ($M=6.18$, $SD=2.9$) were reported to have a significant impact on the

student's attention, behavior and mood. These sensory issues distract the participants from focusing on classroom concepts and divert their attention to focus on distracting sensory stimuli.

Another study, conducted by Jones et al., (2003) analyzed first-hand accounts of sensory experiences written by people with autism. Participants reported experiencing abnormalities in taste, touch, vision, smell and proprioception. An overload of these sensory experiences was a frequent occurrence, along with mono-channel processing. To deal with sensory processing discomfort coping mechanisms were often employed. When discomfort was under control the participants spoke of enjoyment of their experiences and having the ability to interact with their environment and others around them.

Sensory processing in autistic people leads to negative learning outcomes in education, as they may be so preoccupied with sensory difficulties that disable them from concentrating on class concepts and material. For example, Ashburner and colleagues (2008) conducted a study to explore if there was an association between sensory processing and classroom behavioral, emotional, and educational outcomes of children with autism. They found that children with autism usually have difficulty processing sensory information, which can lead to emotional and behavioral difficulties. However, addressing sensory difficulties in autistic students significantly improved their academic performance.

Lack of Social Learning Supports

Autism is partially characterized by difficulties in social communication (Kuzminskaite et al., 2020), which consists of unwritten rules that govern interactions and often change depending on who one is talking to and the circumstance around their conversation. An individual with autism may have difficulty staying on topic, seeing from others' perspective, attending auditory messages, and initiating and maintaining friendships (Vicker, 2009). Further,

their body language may be misinterpreted by others as a sign of frustration and disinterest resulting in avoidance from their peers. These challenges may increase their anxiety and further social isolation, as others may find their behavior strange or rude (Adreon & Durocher, 2007).

Social interaction training services are cited frequently and requested often by parents of autistic people (Elias & White, 2017), and autistic people themselves. Postsecondary students typically face increased social demands associated with emerging adulthood and education. However, these demands are intensified as a neurodivergent student due to age-normative results of transitioning into postsecondary institutions. Unsurprisingly, neurodivergent students experience poor social outcomes. For example, Elias and White (2017) conducted a study to understand the challenges and needs autistic students face in postsecondary education, and found that autistic students typically struggle socially, with parents reporting difficulty in maintaining friendships and social interactions.

Wiorowski (2015) conducted an exploratory study to further understand the experiences of individuals with autism in postsecondary institutions. The 12 participants interviewed in this study noted social interaction as being a major theme. On one hand participants expressed that their social experiences were much more positive than high school, and on the other hand most participants expressed that they did not feel accepted by their peers, they felt they had to choose between being successful in school and being social, and consistently experienced prejudice from their peers and instructors. Additionally, Widman and Lopez-Reyna (2020) conducted a systematic review of the literature to examine postsecondary institutional support for autistic students. The study aimed to identify effective accommodations and interventions to assist with success of autistic students in postsecondary institutions. Of these, the authors found that support

services, such as peer mentoring are effective in improving overall academic performance and reducing stress.

Lack of Emotional Learning and Support

Transitioning into postsecondary institutions can be stressful. As a result, autistic students face increased stress related anxiety within their educational environment. These students may struggle with transitioning into college or university, as it requires them to have the ability to socialize and live independently, while succeeding academically (Glennon, 2001). These challenges collectively contribute to decreased satisfaction and early dropout rates among autistic students, even if they are academically capable (Pugliese and White, 2013). Widman and Lopez-Reyna (2020) conducted a systematic review of the literature to describe supports, interventions, and programs currently implemented in postsecondary institutions. They found that 62% of the studies listed emotional support, specifically group therapy, coaching, behavior management programs, counseling for stress, and general counseling as being effective interventions to help support postsecondary students with autism in their social and academic functioning.

A study conducted by Pugliese and White (2013) investigated the preliminary efficacy and feasibility of problem-solving therapy, to teach individuals to effectively identify and solve problems. The participants who received this therapy showed improvements in emotional and social functioning compared to the control group. Specifically, improvements were seen in problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, social skills, and quality of life. Similarly, another study done by Bauminger (2002) evaluated the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral intervention to assist low-support need children with their social-emotional understanding and social interaction. The results indicated that children who participated in the study were more likely to

initiate positive social interaction with peers after treatment. For example, they were more likely to make eye contact, initiate conversation and/or positive social interaction with their peers, were better able to provide more relevant solutions to different social interactions and were better able to exhibit complex emotions. These studies indicate the importance of social-emotional training for autistic students, as it can assist with making and maintaining friendships, and have a positive impact on academic performance (Rodda & Estes, 2018).

Need for Vocational Training

autistic adults are substantially underrepresented in employment and postsecondary education relative to the general population (Taylor et al., 2015), with many studies indicating only 20% to 30% are employed, and increasingly disengaged from paid employment opportunities (Wilczynski et al., 2015). However, if we consider that many employment positions require social interaction and fluent communication skills, it is not surprising that autistic individuals are often unsuccessful in the job market. School based vocational training supports are necessary to increase the likelihood that employment positions are gained and maintained by autistic individuals, yet few postsecondary institutions offer such services (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020).

A study conducted by Taylor and Seltzer (2011) examined the educational and occupational activities of 66 young adults with autism who recently finished high school. Researchers found that 6% of participants were competitively employed and 12% of them worked in the community with support in place, 56% of participants attended adult day services, and 12% of participants had no daily activities or activities that totaled less than 10 hours a week. Another study done by Taylor et al (2015) examined post-high school employment and educational patterns for autistic adults with an average IQ level. The study found 24.7% of adults

were consistently engaged in competitive employment of postsecondary education, 42.5% were sometimes engaged, and 32.9% never had competitive employment or enrolled in postsecondary education. While nearly 50% of youth with autism without an intellectual disorder are pursuing postsecondary education, it is concerning how high the unemployment is among this population (Taylor et al., 2015). Employment helps autistic individuals develop their identity and self-worth and provide financial stability and independence. Furthermore, employment provides opportunities for community engagement and socialization. Therefore, it is important for institutions to implement vocational training support programs for autistic students.

Need for Communication Development

Communication and social impairment are core features of autism, and often place autistic people at risk for failure and social isolation (Ogletree et al., 2007). To improve outcomes for those with autism, interventions need to be put in place to improve their communication skills. Long-term positive outcomes have been identified to be correlated with the acquisition of functional communication skills (Keogel et al., 2000). In a postsecondary setting communication skills are especially important for success in assignments, coursework's, and exams, as communication barriers impair one's ability to follow directions, express their ideas clearly and concisely, and understand complex language. Developed communication skills also increase the likelihood that the students engage with course material, collaborate with peers, seek support, and advocate for themselves when needed. Moreover, effective communication is critical for building relationships and social connections and allows one to feel a sense of belonging within their institution.

Cullen (2015) examined the needs of autistic college students, with social needs being a major theme. Many of the students expressed the desire to meet people and make friends on

campus but had difficulty doing so. This included difficulty finding places to meet other students with similar interests, and not knowing how to meet people or what to do or say to meet people. Unsurprisingly, this need bridged into academic needs within group work, as students with autism may be challenged by group work as it requires social communication skills. Many students mentioned needing assistance with social interactions during group work, and often struggling with maneuvering through the group process. Throughout this entire study it becomes clear that academic skills were not much of a concern for students, although social elements were. Similarly, Anderson and Butt (2017) conducted a qualitative study to understand the college experience for young autistic adults. They found four themes surrounding success and failure at college, one of which was *Preparation Beyond Academics*. Within this theme, the subtheme *Need to Address ASD-Associated Challenges Prior to Transition* emerged. Participants noted that solely focusing on their academic performance was detrimental, especially because social communication skills and other challenges were not being addressed. Parents also expressed their concern with secondary institutions' approach of only celebrating academic performance instead of planning for life post-graduation and ignoring other issues - which occasionally led to failure in college.

Need for Instrumental Independence

Attending college or university for the first time is a stressful transition, even for neurotypical students. To succeed, students must take responsibility for tracking assignment deadlines and meet higher academic standards. During this time, they may also live away from home, be managing new relationships, coping with loneliness, and building a new identity (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Past research has suggested that this change is even more challenging for neurodivergent students. Considering that people diagnosed with autism often have executive

functioning impairments, including difficulties with working memory, planning, cognitive flexibility, organization, and problem solving (Geurts et al., 2004; Giola et al., 2002; Hill, 2014). For example, Wallace and colleagues (2016) conducted a study to better understand the cognitive functioning of adults with autism in a real-world setting and how it relates to their daily functioning and psychological well-being. The researchers found that the participants exhibited difficulties in flexibility and metacognition. Specifically, initiation, working memory, planning, organizing, and task monitoring.

Executive functioning is necessary for academic success, and such deficits may contribute to the reason why only 39% of autistic students graduate with a postsecondary degree, in comparison to 52% of the general population (Newman et al., 2011). Executive functioning decreases if students feel lonely, stressed, and sad (Diamond, 2014). Therefore, if we care about the academic outcomes of autistic students, we should not only ensure they are happy and feel supported by the university; but also ensure that all their basic psychological needs are met.

Instructional Dissonance

As an increasing number of autistic students are progressing into postsecondary institutions, it is important for campus instructors and staff to understand what autism looks like in the classroom, and to adapt their teaching to reflect the needs of their disabled students. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) reports that over 46% of autistic people show above average intellectual abilities, suggesting that many of those who enroll in postsecondary education are likely to be autistic (von Below et al., 2021). However, even though they possess the ability to attend college or university, autistic students are more likely to drop out. For example, a study designed by Cage and McManemy (2022) examined and compared autistic and neurotypical students' experiences in relation to drop-out. The researchers found that 77.8% of

autistic students considered dropping out, the most common reason being their mental well-being, whereby students frequently cited that university was having a negative impact on their mental health, stress levels, depression, and anxiety (Cage and McManemy, 2022). The students also spoke of their academic difficulties, particularly about the heavy workload, failing modules, deadlines, and assessments. Lastly, they spoke of socialization challenges and feeling like they did not fit in, having difficulty making friends, and not feeling supported by their university support services or during lectures.

For an autistic student to receive support within universities, they must first learn about the available disability services at their institution, provide evidence of their diagnosis, and inform the institution of their autism. However, receiving a diagnosis is particularly difficult for those who are not white heterosexual males (Habayeb et al., 2022), or those who are not intellectually impaired (Shenouda et al., 2023). Because of missed diagnosis and autism stereotypes, undiagnosed adults are said to represent 50-60% of the true autistic population (von Below et al., 2021). A portion of this population may never receive a formal diagnosis or have to wait until they are well into their adulthood. Furthermore, those able to receive an autism diagnosis prior to university may not want to share their diagnosis due to fear of bullying, and discrimination (Johnson and Joshi, 2016; Goddard & Cook, 2022). If a student does decide to share their diagnosis with their institution's disability service, they will be provided with accommodations. However, many students find that these accommodations fail to meet their academic, social, and sensory needs. In addition, many students report experiences where their course instructors fail to implement classroom accommodations for their disabled students (von Below et al., 2021).

To complicate this issue even further, instructors may be unaware of their lack of knowledge within the area of autism. For example, a study done by Tipton and Blacher (2013) reported on the views of diagnostic characteristics and causes associated with autism. Their researcher found that 71.6% of participants indicated that they were at least somewhat aware of the increasing prevalence of autism, but they also believed that this was a direct cause of vaccination. Indicating that while many may be aware of autistic people being ever present, many still do not fully understand what autism is, how it presents, and how to support them. In an education setting this can result in professors and lecturers creating more barriers regarding inclusivity.

von Below and colleagues (2021) conducted a study to explore the autism knowledge and awareness of educators in postsecondary institutions, as well as their willingness to accommodate autistic students. They found ‘dissonance’ to be the overarching theme of participants. Many of the participants seemed to experience a disconnect between their knowledge of autism and the application of this knowledge into their teaching and learning practice. For example, many educators were aware that they’ve likely taught autistic students in the past, however these same educators later suggested that they would only adapt their teaching methodology to be more inclusive only when they know that they are teaching an autistic student.

Pathways to Educational Success

While postsecondary institutions are full of barriers that prevent autistic students from being successful (Waisman et al., 2021), there are things that colleges and universities can implement to make the postsecondary experience a positive and prosperous one. This includes educating campus constituents, such as faculty, staff, and students.

Educating Campus Constituents

In response to increasing numbers of neurodiversity on campus, it is important that faculty, staff, and students have accurate knowledge of autism, and how it presents in a classroom setting. Educating faculty on what to expect, making sure they have the resources to adequately structure their lectures for their autistic students, and ensuring that they are aware of the importance of communicating directly and not being sarcastic, for example, are all important steps to ensuring that students feel comfortable and supported. Young adults on the spectrum may need extra support to succeed, feel safe and comfortable on campus and within their residential accommodations. While many campuses offer general accommodations for disabled students, many of these supports are geared towards aiding students with learning disabilities and physical disabilities than those with autism (Zeedyk et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important for the instructors to have increased knowledge of autism. For example, von Below and colleagues (2021) explored autism awareness and knowledge of educators in higher education, as well as their attitudes towards autistic students. The study found that educators who taught about autism did not feel the need to attend inclusive teaching and autism classes. However, they still displayed teaching practices that were non-inclusive. Indicating that even those who have increased knowledge of autism may still implement harmful teaching practices into their classrooms, making it clear that lecturing faculty and staff would greatly benefit from inclusive teaching training.

Similar can be said for the importance of acceptance from peers in higher education. Feeling socially integrated and connected to the college or university community are recognized as factors to success for students with autism. However, an inherent lack of autism awareness among students hinders acceptance and integration (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). autistic

students may find their postsecondary environment to be hostile and full of challenges. In this regard, postsecondary institutions should introduce methods to reduce prejudice and discrimination. This can be done through intergroup contact through activities like bridging programs, where neurotypical and neurodivergent students can interact prior to the beginning of the semester (White et al., 2016). These programs assist with campus wide acceptance and provide opportunities for social integrations between students with and without disabilities.

Institutions should also consider implementing peer mentorship programs to assist incoming autistic undergraduate students with typically developing undergrad or graduate students who will provide one-on-one mentorship. The pairs typically meet routinely to discuss solutions for problems they may be experiencing on campus, and discuss ideas for campus integration (e.g., joining campus clubs). The mentors will receive training about autism from program supervisors, whom they will also regularly meet with to discuss the progress of their mentees (Trevisan et al., 2021). Peer mentorships have been found to be beneficial to both mentees and mentors, with researchers finding that 87.5% of mentees agreeing that peer mentorship programs helped them with personal growth and development, and 90.4% of mentors agreed that they learned more about autism and mentorship (Trevisan et al., 2021).

Chapter 2

Theories that have informed my research

To interpret and analyze the data, this study utilizes several theoretical models to help inform and make sense of my research. A theoretical framework is often used to guide and interpret complex social phenomena, such as the experience of being both Black and autistic - whose racial and ethnic identity intersect with their disability and other identities - who deal with the challenges of belonging in school. In this research, I employ these theoretical frameworks: 1)

Intersectionality 2) Critical Race Theory 3) Dis/ability Critical Race Studies. I believe these frameworks will allow for an adequate examination of the Black autistic experiences.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), is used to describe a complex multidimensional social phenomenon of double oppression experienced by Black women in the United States. Since the term's inception, it has expanded to recognize that one's identity is influenced by overlapping social identities related to racism and oppression. Intersectionality merges race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, and religion, to create truthful and complex identity. Intersectionality is a critical component of autism research, as it seeks to question disadvantages and privileges that typically result in the further marginalization of some individuals. I have chosen to ground my work in intersectionality because it allows for the shift from traditional views that treat social categories as separate and independent; and instead highlights their interconnected nature to emphasize the need for detailed analyses that capture the complexities of lived experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2021).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the complex interplay between race and power, asserting that race is not a biological reality but a social construct (Delgado & Stefanic, 2023). Further, it examines how laws and policies perpetuate systemic racism and how racial power dynamics influence societal structures. Toni Morrison's quote below encapsulates the underpinnings of CRT:

Race has become metaphorical - a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body than biological "race" ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so

completely embedded in daily discourse that is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before.

(Morrison, 1992, p.63)

CRT is a main theoretical lens through which I understand the dispersal and enactment of power within academic and disability relations. This study seeks to investigate and highlight the educational experiences of Black autistic students and challenge the narrative that these students are less capable of success, both academically and socially. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2013), Critical Race Theory became prominent in the mid-1970s with the early work of legal scholars, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who were discomforted by the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. While Bell and Freeman sought to disrupt legal thought around African American civil rights legislation, they did not address institutional racism, nor society's adherence to the white interest (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In the 1990s, scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) began to emphasize the ways in which institutional racism impacts education in the United States.

In this work, Critical Race Theory helps contextualize the effects of institutional, structural and systemic racism in education. Primarily, I draw on the work produced by Taylor, Delgado and Stefancic, Gilborn, and Barnes, who outline that CRT has several key tenants. I use Delgado and Stefancic (2000) insights of CRT to inform my work. The tenets are as follows:

- (1) CRT begins with the notion that racism is “normal, not aberrant, in American society”, and because it is so intertwined within the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture.
- (2) Interest convergence postulates that “white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest.”

- (3) CRT employs storytelling as a way of challenging racial oppression. When racialized people articulate their own life-stories and “writers analyze the myths, presuppositions and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render Blacks and other minorities one-down.”
- (4) Each culture creates a reality in which it advances its own self-interests. Meaning that our social world, as its current construct, is not static; and has the ability to be shaped through our words, stories, and silence.

CRT challenges tradition by stressing the need to understand racism within its historical, social, and economic context (Delgado & Stefaniec, 2000). Beginning with the understanding that racism is normalized in American society highlights how systemic racism pervades all aspects of life, including the identification, understanding and support of Black autistic individuals.

Counter-stories, a tenet that underpins my research, provides necessary context for understanding, interpreting, and feeling the voices of dispossessed individuals who exist at the intersection of race and disability. Delgado (1989) suggests three important reasons for storytelling. First, much of our reality is socially constructed; second, stories provide a way for members of marginalized groups to share their experiences and perspectives, affirm their identities, and preserve their sense of self-worth and resilience; and third, the exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome culturally biased perspectives. Additionally, my work serves as a vehicle for the advancement of the Black autistic self-interest. Because we can reconstruct our social world, giving power to those who live at the intersection of race and disability allows for the repossession of their own narrative.

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

Throughout this work, I employ Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) to elucidate how the intersection of race and disability further disadvantage Black autistic students during their postsecondary journey. DisCrit is an intersectionality theoretical framework that integrates disabilities studies and critical race theory in education and society. Historically, disability studies have focused on whiteness; likewise, critical race theory lacks disability focus. DisCrit, however, focuses on the ways that ableism and racism independently exist to uphold notions of normalcy. For instance, disabled students of color experience disproportionate negative outcomes, such as higher rates of incarceration and low graduation rates, due to overlapping forms of discrimination and interlocking oppressive forces (Annamma et al., 2016).

The field of DisCrit theorizes the intersection of race and ability, examining the ever-changing lines between what is considered normal and abnormal, as well as how one's racial positioning influences their categorization as either abled or disabled (Annamma et al, 2016). Initially emerging as a political and interdisciplinary field in the 1980s, disability studies argue that disability is socially constructed rather than an inherent issue within the individual. According to Linton (1998), disability studies focus on how society interprets human variations of behaviour, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing. This perspective shifts the focus from individual traits to societal factors that label these traits as deviations from the norm. According to Davis (2005), the term “normal” was first introduced into the English language during the mid-1800s. Influenced by industrialization of the late 19th century, and the demand for capable workers, the idea of normalcy was born. Individuals became stigmatized and categorized through methods such as medical statistics, eugenics, and the bell curve (Whitney, 2016). Thus, leading to the creation of the medical model of disability, which views disability as

a deficit that must be cured or eliminated for an individual to be a fully functional human being (Siebers, 2008).

For centuries, due to white supremacy, society has tried to prove inferiority and limited intelligence Black people to justify slavery and unequal treatment (Annamma et al., 2016). Since the recognition of students with disabilities within the educational system, Black students have been disproportionately labeled, referred and placed in special education programs (Stanard, 2016). Because the diagnosis of disabilities relies on the subjective judgement of school personnel rather than biological facts, researchers found interest in the intersection of how race and disability has been used to further marginalize already disadvantaged groups within our society. Drawing upon the theories of disability studies and Critical Race Theory, DisCrit seeks to address the structural power imbalance of ableism and racism by recognizing the social, political, historical, and economic interests of restricting educational equity of disabled students of colour. The tenets of DisCrit are as follows (Annamma et al., 2018):

- (1) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate independently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normally
- (2) DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on
- (3) DisCrit emphasized the social construction of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/ables, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms
- (4) DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research

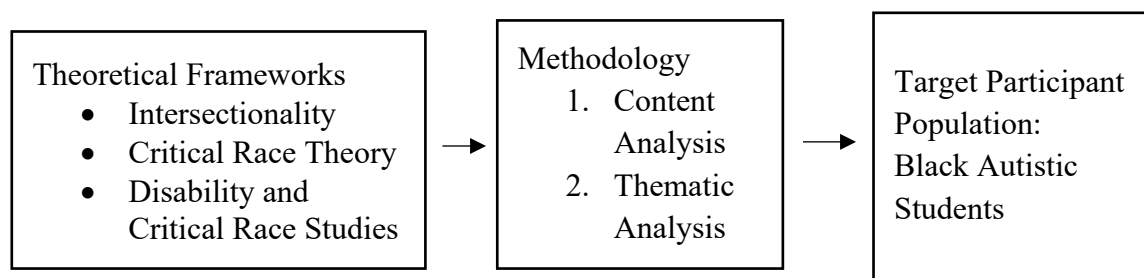
- (5) DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens
- (6) DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens
- (7) DisCrit required activism and supports all form of resistance

Throughout this study, I utilize DisCrit in many ways, such as through the analyzation of racism and ableism and how it permeates academic institutions and its impact on those with multiple marginalized identities. I acknowledge the intersectional identities of Black autistic students, who through their race, gender, sexuality, and disability, are perpetually marked as deviant within the education system. I recognize that those at the intersection of race and disability are silenced in academic research, therefore I attempt to privilege the voices of Black autistic postsecondary students so that their stories can be heard. As a scholar, I employ DisCrit within my research as a form of intellectual activism to highlight the experiences of disabled students of colour, who face multiple forms of oppression and marginalization, as creators of knowledge.

Chapter 4: Methods

Figure 1

Conceptual Map of Research Process



Theoretical Perspective

American philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962) first used the word paradigm to describe a philosophical way of thinking. In educational research, paradigm is used to describe a researcher's perspectives, beliefs, or thoughts, that assist in the interpretation of the research data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Essentially, a paradigm is the lens through which a researcher views the world. Paradigms are comprised of four elements, including epistemology (how we come to know), ontology (our assumptions), methodology (how to best gain knowledge) and axiology (ethical considerations) (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

My research aims to actively include the perspectives and experiences of Black and autistic students in alignment with intersectionality. My research is positioned within the paradigms of Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Critical Race Studies. Meaning that my research choices epistemologically assume that reality is shaped by the interaction of gender, cultural, ethnic, religious, and political factors (Reham & Alharthi, 2016). Mainly, research from these paradigms is concerned with changing society and bringing awareness to actions that limit freedom. Specifically, confronting power structures, exposing oppressive structures, and unraveling inequality (Kincheloe, 2008).

Qualitative Paradigm

A content analysis is described as a systematic categorizing and coding approach used for exploring large amounts of information unobtrusively to determine patterns and trends of words used, their frequency, their relationship, and the structures and discourses of communication (Powers and Knapp, 1990; Mayring, 2015; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). By systematically sampling, coding, and counting content, it is possible to make relevant discoveries (Bengtsson, 2016), as a qualitative content analysis is a method aimed at the subjective interpretation of text

data by systematically classifying and coding to identify themes or patterns (Serafini & Reid, 2019).

Reflexive thematic analysis focuses on understanding meaning and aims to generate contextualized and situated knowledge. This method of qualitative methodology captures the values, orientations, and assumptions needed to conduct reflexive thematic analysis in a way that is aligned with a Big Q approach. Compared to other qualitative methodologies, reflexive thematic analysis is not encumbered by pre-existing theoretical frameworks, foci of meaning or orientations to data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Instead, its analytic goal is to routinely reflect on one's assumptions, expectations, choices and actions throughout the research process. This process of reflection considers the researchers personal positionings and standpoints (i.e., sociodemographic positioning, the intersections of race, culture, social class, etc.), and values and assumptions about the world. I find this methodology appropriate to use in this study as it considers the deeply embedded values and experiences of myself and how they inform my research practice.

Throughout this process, my research prioritizes Black, and autistic knowledge. Being Black, with both autistic and neurodivergent family members, it was important to me that this research ontologically critiques educational structures that are oppressive to Black autistic postsecondary students. Since the critical theory paradigm situates its research to address the unbalanced dynamic between political, economic, and social issues in relation to conflict, struggle, and social oppression, it strongly aligns with the theoretical framework of the neurodiversity paradigm, and the tenets of critical race theory (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The neurodiversity paradigm is characterized by the understanding that autism is no more of a disorder than any racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender minority group (Huges, 2020). Critical race

theory acknowledges societal racial disparities and inequalities, as well as questioning the enforcement of racial hierarchies by people with good intentions (Morgan, 2022).

Methodology and Methods

Framed by the critical theory paradigm, this study utilizes constructivism to explore the experiences and perspectives of Black autistic students within their academic settings. With the goal of unveiling the complexity of such a phenomenon, critical theory was suitable for understanding the experiences of existing as a Black autistic person. Critical theory emphasizes the examination and critique of society and culture by applying knowledge from the social sciences and humanities. It also seeks to uncover power structures, inequalities, and social injustices that are embedded in societal norms, institutions, and practices. The goal of critical theory is not only to understand the world but to change it by challenging and transforming oppressive structures (Hoffman, 1987; Howell, 2016; Callaghan, 2016; Blagoev & Costas, 2022). I further utilize constructivism (Adom et al., 2016) as a methodological guide to answer the following questions:

1. How are the voices and perspectives of Black autistic postsecondary students represented in academic research and grey literature; and what patterns exist in the portrayal of their experiences?
2. How do Black autistic students experience, perceive, and cope with their educational environments in terms of belonging and inclusion?
3. How can educational environments be restructured to provide more accessible and equitable support for Black autistic students?

Content Analysis Data Collection

Selection and Sampling

To identify articles for the content analysis, I searched the EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete database, Proquest, PsycInfo, and PubMed for peer-reviewed articles related to Black autistic student experiences in academia with Boolean operators to capture relevant terms (e.g., caribbean OR “Black?canadian” OR BIPOC OR racial inequality OR "Racial inequality"Black OR "African American*" OR "afro*?American*AND student* OR educat* OR learn* OR school OR post?secondary OR "higher education" OR university OR college OR elementary OR "middle?school" OR adolescent OR teen* OR teenager* OR learn* OR adult). The searches resulted in a total of 1015 articles. I reviewed the abstracts of these articles in pairs for inclusion or exclusion. Many of these abstracts were excluded because they were duplicate entries, or not related to Black and/or autistic individuals (i.e., “African American Cancer Survivors Perspectives on Cancer Clinical Trial Participation in a Safety-Net Hospital: Considering the Role of the Social Determinants of Health”), not peer reviewed sources (i.e., newsletters or books), or book reviews.

TikTok Data Collection

Selection and Sampling

Due to the apparent lack of research on the postsecondary educational experiences of Black autistic students, I explored TikTok posts by Black autistic content creators discussing their academic journeys. I chose TikTok because it is a popular platform that allows individuals to share personal stories and insights in an authentic manner. Buvknell Bossen & Kottasz (2020) illustrate that young users are especially active on the platform and tend to share a substantial amount of information. Additionally, the app’s vast and diverse user base provides a rich source

of firsthand accounts and perspectives that are often underrepresented in traditional academic research. Given the scarcity of recent academic articles on this topic, I started by creating a new TikTok account; once logged in, I used the search feature to type in keywords related to the topic I wanted to analyze: Black autistic adolescents-adults educational experiences. My search words were: Black, African American, Caribbean, Afro-American, Black Canadian, autism, autism spectrum disorder, autism spectrum, neurodivergent, disabled, student, education, school, postsecondary, higher education, university, adolescent, teen, adult, experience, college, bullying, #autisticadult, #autism, #actuallyautistic, #autizzy, #neurospicy. Videos that matched my search criteria were saved to my profile and subsequently downloaded, transcribed, coded and organized in an excel spreadsheet.

Data Analysis

For the content analysis, all abstracts that met the inclusion criteria were maintained for coding. This process resulted in 74 articles that appeared to be relevant and were retrieved for full coding and analysis; of these, 16 did not meet inclusion criteria upon inspection of the full article (e.g., about parental perceptions of autism). Thus, the final sample consisted of 57 peer-reviewed articles, which were analyzed and coded. To establish a coding procedure for the present study, I modified a coding form used by recent content analyses published in a peer reviewed journal (Huang et al., 2010). Each article was coded and reviewed independently by myself; and all articles were coded based on whether they were empirical (e.g., quantitative or qualitative) or nonempirical (e.g., literature review), year of publication, topics addressed in the article, methodology (e.g., study design, sampling strategies, recruitment strategies), demographic composition of participants (e.g., race, gender), and positionality of authors (e.g., race, disability status).

Organization and analysis of grey literature was facilitated utilizing the guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. Which included the following six steps: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting the findings. To ensure rigor, I generated the initial codes and preliminary themes; and once those were identified I met with my thesis supervisor to share and refine each theme created that accurately described the challenges experienced by the content creators.

Chapter 3: Results

During my content analysis, I found a complete lack of both empirical and non-empirical academic research investigating the experiences of Black autistic students in postsecondary education. Of the research found, which only pertained to elementary and secondary educational experiences of Black autistic students, none centered the Black autistic perspective, and none sought the first-hand experiences of being a Black autistic student from Black autistic students. Below you will find a detailed analysis of what methodologies were used; demographic characteristics of participants and authors; study perspective; and which common topics and social justice themes were published most, and whether the publications aligned with an intersectional framework.

Methodological Characteristics of Empirical Studies

I assessed empirical articles ($n = 55$) whereby authors present and analyze data (i.e., survey results, field observations, meta-analysis, and/or systematic reviews), to determine the trends in the study design.

Sampling procedures and participant recruitment

As apparent in Table 1, almost half of the empirical studies did not specify their sampling procedure ($n = 26, 38.2\%$). However, of those that disclosed this information, the most common sampling procedure employed was convenience sampling ($n = 16, 29.1\%$). Among the various methods of recruitment, online strategies, in addition to mail and solicitation were most used ($n = 36, 66.5\%$), followed by snowball sampling ($n = 8, 14.5\%$), and recruited participants from schools and school districts ($n = 8, 14.5\%$).

Data collection

The most common methods of data collection included survey questionnaires (61.8%), followed by secondary data (41.8%), and interviews (40%). Studies that utilized survey questionnaires mostly contained a predominantly white sample population (55%); with only 23% of these studies being composed of an all-Black or predominantly Black sample population. Of the studies that utilized secondary data as their primary form of data collection, they contained a predominantly white sample population (64%), with only 12% of studies consisting of predominantly Black participants. Additionally, studies that utilized interviews as their data collection method, usually contained an all-Black sample population (68%), or a predominantly white sample population (27%).

Geographic location

Next, the empirical studies were coded to determine participants' geographical locations from which participants were recruited (see Table 1). An overwhelming majority of participants were recruited from the United States ($n = 50, 90.9\%$). Additionally, the empirical studies were coded to determine what kind of geographic environment participants were recruited from. It was found that most participants lived in an urban area ($n = 34, 61.8\%$), while the rest were spread

out across suburban areas ($n = 23$, 41.8%), and rural areas ($n = 22$, 40.0%). The rest of the studies did not specify participant environments ($n = 17$, 30.9%). This lack of specificity means that it is unclear whether these participants were in urban, suburban, or rural areas, which limits generalizability, as geographic environments influence recruitment and retention, because neighborhoods differ in socioeconomic status, infrastructure such as schools and transportation, community and social dynamics, services and amenities such as healthcare and education, and economic opportunities. For some descriptive statistics, the numbers do not add up due to the use of participants from multiple geographic locations or multiple recruitment strategies, sampling methods, etc.

Table 1
Methodological Characteristics of Empirical Studies (N = 55)

Methodological Variables	n	%
Participant Geographic Locations		
United States	50	90.9
Britain	2	3.6
Kenya	1	1.8
Canada	1	1.8
Sudan	1	1.8
Uganda	1	1.8
Sampling Procedure		
Convenience	16	29.1
Random	5	9.1
Stratified Random	8	14.5
Purposive	9	16.4

Not Specified	21	38.2
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Recruitment Procedure

Snowball Sample	8	14.5
Flyers, Social Media, Emails, Mail/Solicitation	36	65.5
Schools/School Districts	8	14.5
Clinical Referrals, Community Centers, and Relevant Organizations	5	9.1
Not Specified	26	47.3

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews	22	40.0
Survey Questionnaire	34	61.8
Observations, Focus Groups	4	7.3
Transcripts, Reports, Student Assessments	5	9.1
Secondary Data	23	41.8
Narrative Inquiry	2	3.6
Not Specified	5	9.1

Participant Geographic Environment

Urban	34	61.8
Suburban	23	41.8
Rural	22	40.0

Not Specified	17	30.9
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Note. Percentages do not always equal 100 because some studies utilized multiple recruitment procedures, data collection procedures, and sampled from several geographic locations. For example, for participant geographic location, one study (Johnson-Taylor, 2022) utilized American participants, and two participants born and raised and currently residing in Sudan and Uganda.

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Most of the studies provided limited information pertaining to participant demographics. For instance, an overwhelming majority of the articles did not specify parental level of educational attainment ($n = 33$, 60.0%), and household income ($n = 29$, 52.7%). Of the articles that did include parent education level, it was found that many parents only obtained their high school diploma ($n = 13$, 23.6%). Additionally, of the articles that did include household income, 54.5% of studies reported that their participants had a household income range of less than \$50,000 USD. Similarly, another 29.1% of studies reported a household income range between \$50,000-\$74,999. Furthermore, most studies included detailed information about the racial composition of their samples. Of these articles, most contained an exclusively Black sample population ($n = 21$, 38.2%). It was also found that many of the studies consisted of mostly white ($n = 21$, 36.2%) or mostly Black ($n = 6$, 10.9%). See Table 2 below for more details.

Table 2
Participant Demographics of Empirical Studies (N = 55)

Participant Race	n	%
Exclusively Black	21	38.2
Mostly Black	6	10.9

Exclusively white	0	0.0
Mostly white	21	36.2
Hispanic/Latinx	3	5.5
Not Specified	4	7.3
Household Income (USD)		
<\$24,999	14	25.5
\$25,000-\$49,999	16	29.1
\$50,000-\$74,999	16	29.1
\$75,000-\$99,999	10	18.2
\$100,000+	7	12.7
Not Specified	29	52.7
Parental/Caregiver Education Level		
Less than High School	6	10.9
High School/GED	13	23.6
Certificate	2	3.6
Military	1	1.8
Some College	9	16.4
College	3	5.5
Bachelor/Associate	12	21.8
Trade/Vocational	3	5.5
Masters/Doctoral	12	21.8
Not Specified	33	60.0

Note. Percentages do not always equal 100 because some studies contained participants from multiple household income levels, and diverse levels of parental or caregiver educational attainment.

Demographic Characteristics of Authors

In conducting a study on the educational experiences of Black autistic students, it is crucial that those involved in the research are either Black and/or autistic themselves or have a close personal or professional connection to the autistic community. This perspective ensures the research is grounded in an authentic understanding of the lived experiences and challenges faced by Black autistic individuals. Research with direct connections to the community are more likely to approach the study with cultural sensitivity, empathy, and a nuanced understanding of the intersectional issues at play. Their involvement helps to mitigate potential biases and enhances the credibility and relevance of their findings, ultimately contributing to more effective advocacy and support for this underserved population. It was found that a vast majority of the articles were authored by white neurotypical researchers ($n = 26, 45.6\%$), or Black neurotypical researchers ($n = 20, 35.1\%$). Meaning that none of the studies truly center the Black autistic perspective because none of the studies were authored by Black autistic researchers. Instead, it was common for researchers to rely on the secondary observations of caregivers and parents ($n = 26, 45.6\%$), teachers ($n = 1, 1.8\%$), or siblings ($n = 1, 1.8\%$), rather than trying to understand what it is like to be a Black autistic student directly from Black autistic community members.

Table 3
Demographic Characteristics of Authors (N = 57)

Author Race and/or Disability	n	%
Black Neurotypical Authorship	20	35.1
Black Autistic Authorship	0	0.0
Black with Autistic Family	6	10.5
White Neurotypical Authorship	26	45.6
White Autistic Authorship	0	0.0

White with Autistic Family	0	0.0
Undisclosed Race or Disability Stats	4	7.0
Asian Neurotypical Authorship	6	10.5

Note. Percentages do not always equal 100 because some studies contained authors of diverse demographic characteristics. Additionally, given the racial and ethnic disparities in treatment of racialized autistic and neurodiverse individuals, I have chosen to prioritize Black identity and center the Black experiences. To maintain a DisCrit perspective, it is important to look at disabled people inside of their racial context to dismantle interlocking systems of oppression, and to entirely understand the ways that racism and ableism are interconnected and normalized throughout our society.

Study Perspective

When conducting and analyzing research, the perspective from which a study is conducted is crucial, as it has the capacity to significantly influence the framing of research questions, the interpretation of data, and the overall conclusion drawn from the study. In the context of this content analysis, the lack of Black autistic perspective is particularly noteworthy. In my analysis, I found none (0%) of the articles centered a Black autistic perspective. Additionally, 40.4% of the articles relied on secondary data from primarily white participants and failed to center a Black autistic perspective. Furthermore, 10.5% of articles had used primary data, however these articles did not center the Black autistic perspective either. See table 4.

Secondary Data Analysis

McClain and colleagues (2021) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the effectiveness of reading comprehension interventions for autistic children (ages 6-17). Consisting primarily of non-Black participants, the study concluded that reading comprehension interventions are

increasing reading comprehension skills for children with autism. However, this study lacks representation of Black autistic children and fails to capture the unique experiences and needs of Black autistic individuals, leaving a gap in understanding how these interventions affect this specific group. Similarly, Liu and colleagues (2023) investigate racial and ethnic disparities in geographic access to autism resources across the US. Also consisting of primarily non-Black participants, researchers found that American Indian or Alaska Native autistic children and Hispanic autistic children had significant disparities in access to autism resources in comparison to their White autistic peers. Moreover, regions with higher proportions of Black or Hispanic autistic children (>50% of the population) have fewer resources than those with lower proportions of these groups. While this study considered areas with a higher proportion of Black autistic children, it did so in a comparative context rather than centering their unique needs, experiences, and perspectives. See table 4 below for more details.

Krezmien et al., (2017), conducted a comparison analysis of the suspension rates of students with autism or intellectual disabilities in Maryland from 2004 to 2015. This study, also consisting of primarily white participants, found that in 2004, Black autistic students were slightly more likely to be suspended than white autistic students (4.4% vs 4.7%); and in 2015, white non-disabled students were least likely to be suspended (2.13%), with higher rates of suspension among both white (3.3%) and Black (3.3%) autistic students. Most notably, in 2015, Black intellectually disabled students (10.5%) were five times more likely to be suspended than white non-disabled students, while Black non-disabled students (6.6%) faced suspension at three times the rate of their white non-disabled peers. Like the study spearheaded by Lui and colleagues (2023), Krezmien et al., (2017) provided data on the suspension rates of Black autistic and intellectually disabled students in a comparative manner, rather than centering Black

autistic students' specific experiences and challenges. This paper lacks analysis of the underlying reasons for these disparities. Researchers fail to explain the unique contexts and systemic issues faced by Black autistic students, nor propose or discuss interventions or solutions tailored to address the needs of these students. See table 4 below for more details.

Primary Data Analysis

Kraemer and colleagues (2020) examined the quality of high school programs for students with autism in the United States. Using predominantly white participants from rural and suburban areas, this study found that on average, public schools tend to provide programs that are minimally adequate in quality. Specifically, the domains that had the greatest levels of quality were the learning environment, learning climate, and family participation, each reflecting feelings of safety in the learning environment, an atmosphere of positivity, and opportunities for families to meaningfully be involved in the educational process. Domains of challenges included assessment, communication, social, independence, transitions, and behaviour. Items in these domains reflect the program's inability to collect data on IEP goals, provide opportunities for socialization, engagement, and communication with peers, and implement opportunities for independence in the curriculum. While Black students are included in this study, the use of predominantly white participants from rural and suburban areas reflects a broader issue, where marginalized voices, particularly those at the intersection of race and disability, are often overlooked. This study fails to address how systemic racism and ableism intersect to impact the educational experiences of Black autistic students. By failing to adequately represent further marginalized populations, this study perpetuates the invisibility of Black autistic individuals in education and research. See table 4 below for more details.

Another study conducted by Rose et al., (2019) evaluated bullying involvement (e.g., direct victimization, cybervictimization, fighting) among 1055 students, from grades 6-12, with and without disabilities. In this study, students were demographically matched based on race, gender and grade level. Among students with autism, research found that autistic students who were in more inclusive educational settings (where they are educated alongside peers without disabilities) reported higher levels of victimization and relational victimization compared to their peers without disabilities. This means that these students experienced more bullying and social exclusion in environments where they were integrated with their non-disabled peers. On the other hand, students with autism who are placed in more restrictive settings (where they are educated separately from peers without disabilities) reported higher levels of fighting compared to those in more inclusive environments. Suggesting that students in more isolated environments experienced more physical confrontations or aggressive interactions. Again, this study included primarily non-Black participants and failed to consider how the intersection of race and disability contribute to instances of bullying and victimization amongst their Black participants. See table 4 below for more details.

Parent/Caregiver Perspective

A large trend throughout the review of the literature included centering the perspectives of parents and caregivers over the perspectives of Black autistic individuals themselves. For instance, researchers such as Carter (2022), Anyanwu (2020), Brown (2018), Dababnah et al., (2021), and Davis (2023) conducted studies to explore the ways in which low-income African American parents are involved in the individualized education planning of their autistic child or understanding the experiences of African American parents in navigating school systems. While these topics and perspectives are valuable and necessary, it is crucial to examine how Black

autistic students navigate their academic institutions to fully grasp and address their unique challenges.

An example of a study that articulated the experiences of being a parent or caregiver of a Black autistic child is McNair (2015), who explored the roles that parents played in navigating their sons elementary (K-8) education. Her findings indicate that many of the participants describe feeling isolated when learning about their child's autism and being ridiculed for attempting to learn the school's special education system and called lazy by school personnel, with one teacher stating that the parents weren't “doing enough at home” (pg. 69). Other participants describe being told by the school that they could not provide services to their child, as well as consistently being insulted and invalidated by school professionals. In a similar fashion, Morgan & Stahmer (2020) give voice to single Black mothers advocating for their autistic child in American school systems. They find that all mothers in this study expressed a plethora of challenges that are structurally and systemically ableist, racist, and sexist regarding communication with school personnel and intervention staff throughout various points in their child's development. Some of these challenges included obtaining an autism diagnosis and services, racial prejudice resulting in misdiagnosis, and poor service quality. See table 4 below for more details.

Table 4
Study Perspectives of Empirical and Non-Empirical Articles (N = 57)

Positionality of Article	n	Approximate %
Authors Center Black Autistic Perspective	0	0.0

Secondary Data Analysis by non-autistic Researchers on Primarily white Samples <i>Does Not Center Black Autistic Perspective</i>	23	40.4
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Primary Data Analysis by non-Autistic Researchers on Primarily White Samples <i>Does Not Center Black Autistic Perspective</i>	6	10.5
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Stakeholder Research Perspective of Black Autistic People

Parent/Caregiver	26	45.6
Sibling (<i>inclusive</i>)	1	1.8
Teacher	1	1.8

*All percentages have been rounded up

Note. Positionality of Article refers to the perspective in which the research was conducted and analyzed. For instance, 46.3% of articles conducted quantitative secondary data analysis and analyzed participant responses from their non-autistic, and potentially non-Black perspectives. Thereby overlooking and misrepresenting the true experience of being a Black autistic student. *Stakeholder Research Perspective of Black autistic People* demonstrate the perspective in autism research, where researchers rely on the observations of teachers, caregivers, and siblings instead of directly engaging with and analyzing the lived experiences and perspectives of Black autistic individuals themselves.

Topics of Focus

Table 5 highlights the topic of focus covered in each article ($n = 57$). The most frequent topics of focus across all articles included (a) parental support ($n = 12$), (b) student support services ($n = 11$), and communication challenges ($n = 10$) between school staff, parents, and

students. Alternatively, researchers spent less time focusing on students' academic difficulties ($n = 3$), emotional dysregulation ($n = 3$) and encounters with the justice system ($n = 2$). Below

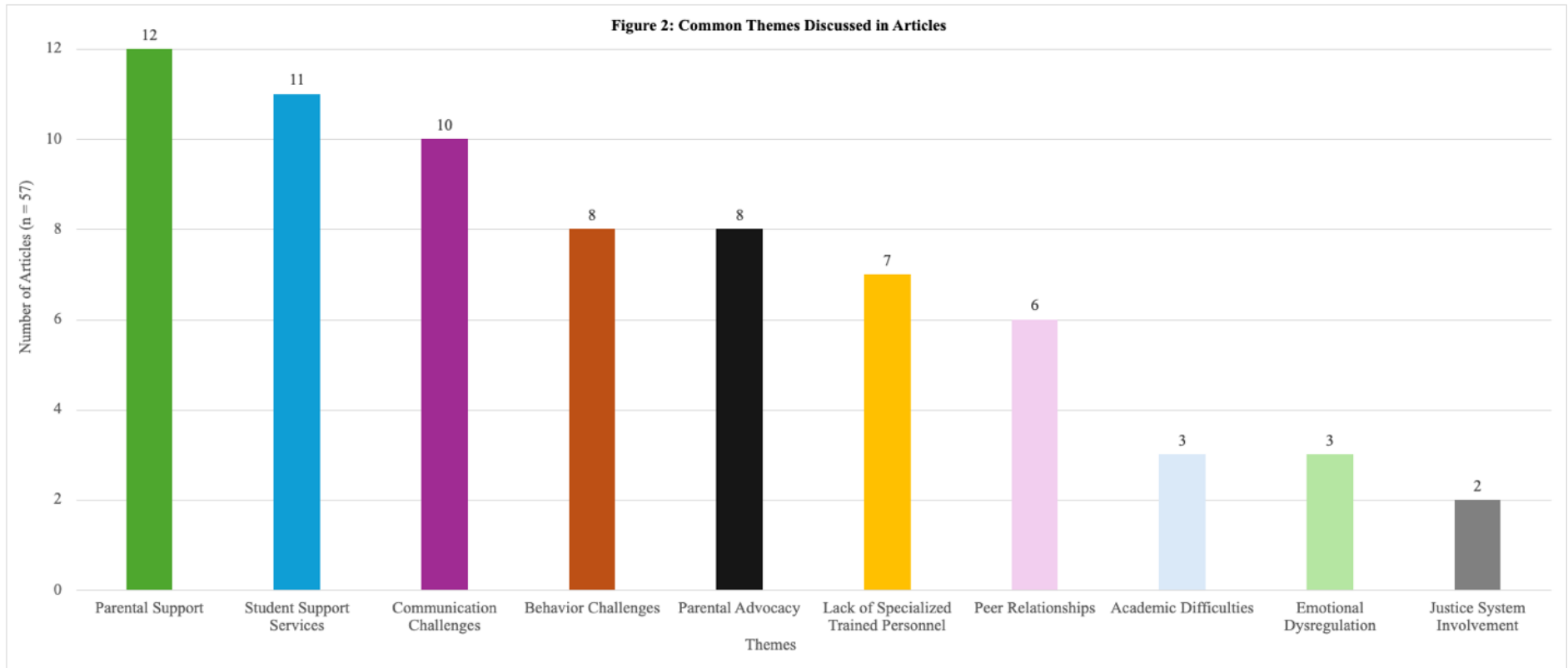
Table 5 is Figure 2, a visual summary of the topics discussed throughout the articles.

Table 5

Relevant Topics Discussed in Empirical and Non-Empirical Articles (N = 57; ages 3-26)

Topics Discussed	n	%
Parental Support	12	21.1
Student Support Services	11	19.3
Communication Challenges	10	17.5
Behavior Challenges	8	14.0
Parental Advocacy	8	14.0
Lack of Specialized Trained Personnel	7	12.3
Peer Relationships	6	10.3
Academic Difficulties	3	5.3
Emotional dysregulation	3	5.3
Encounters with the Justice System	2	3.5

Notes. This chart provides a clear overview of the major barriers identified in the literature. From this table, parental support is the most frequently discussed topic. This is followed closely by student support services and communication challenges. Other notable themes include behaviour challenges and parental advocacy, each discussed in 14% of the articles. Less frequently mentioned topics are the lack of specialized training personnel, peer relationships, and academic difficulties, indicating that many studies have focused more on caregiver experiences of supporting their Black autistic children in school rather than on the direct experiences of Black autistic students within their academic institutions.



Thematic Analysis

This section includes major social justice topics and themes found throughout the articles.

Social Justice Topics

Incorporating social justice topics into literature focused on Black autistic students is critically important for several reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges and addresses the systemic inequalities and discrimination that these students often face as the intersection of race and disability. Social justice topics highlight the need for equitable access to educational resources, opportunities, and support systems, which are frequently lacking for Black autistic students. Furthermore, integrating these topics and themes into the literature promotes awareness and advocacy, encouraging educators, policymakers, and researchers to recognize and challenge the biases and barriers that contribute to educational disparities. By framing the discussion with a social justice lens, the literature can document the experience of Black autistic students, while also calling for meaningful change and accountability. This approach ensures that the research contributes to broader efforts aimed at achieving fairness and equity for all students, particularly those who are at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Given this, it was important to review articles and code them as relevant to social justice topics.

I found that an overwhelming majority of articles did not have any mention of social justice topics ($n = 71.9\%$); and of the articles that did, they mainly spoke of racism ($n = 9$, 15.8%), intersectionality ($n = 8$, 14%), and Critical Race Theory ($n = 4$, 7%). Of these articles that spoke of social justice topics, some researchers did a good job of successfully integrating them within their literature and methodologies (e.g. Carter, 2022; Samimi et al., 2023). For instance, Hannon (2017), conducted an autoethnography detailing how their cultural, familial, and occupational identities intersect while navigating their relationship with their autistic sons'

teachers and school staff. In this article, Hannon does a good job of articulating the importance of Black identity and intersectionality and explains how his identities confound his experiences as a Black father with a Black autistic son. Similarly, McNair (2015) conducted a case study to examine the roles of African American parents of autistic males. Her study is grounded in Critical Race Theory and intersectionality, which allows for an adequate examination of the inequities in education as it relates to race, disability, and gender. Other studies, such as Anyanwu's (2020) documentation of the subjective personal experiences of the IEP process for African American parents with autistic children, did a poor job of integrating social justice topics within their paper. Although this study was conducted by a Black author who used an entirely Black sample population, no mention of topics such as intersectionality, DisCrit, or Critical Race Theory was mentioned. However, racial discrimination was briefly articulated once in their literature review. Likewise, Angell and Solomon (2014) conducted a study examining familial experiences of autism and their interactions with healthcare and school professionals. While their study consisted of predominantly Black participants, there was no mention of the intersection of race and disability, racial disparities, ableism or anything of the like. However, their use of ethnographic methods provided an underlying theme of social justice to their research.

Table 6

Social Justice Topics Discussed in Empirical and Non-Empirical Articles (N = 57)

Social Justice Topic	n	%
No Social Justice Topics	41	71.9
Intersectionality	8	14
Racism	9	15.8
Critical Race Theory	4	7
Anti-Black Racism	1	1.8
Cultural Model of Disability	1	1.8

Cultural Capital	1	1.8
bell hooks Notion of Home Joy	1	1.8
Resilience Theory	1	1.8
Cultural Deficit Model	1	1.8
Cultural Brokers	1	1.8
Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Development Theory	1	1.8

Note. Percentages do not always equal 100 because some studies utilize multiple social justice topics.

Results

Demographic Information of TikTok Content Creators

Of the 22 content creators, 18 identified as Black, two identified as biracial, one identified as Afro-Indigenous, and one identified as coloured. All identified as autistic and of the ages I could find, creators seem to be between 22 and 32 years old. Thirteen disclosed that they have Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). Four disclosed they have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD); two are Bipolar, two have Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), and one disclosed that they have dyslexia. Additionally, two identified as Transgender, five are Nonbinary. Lastly, 20 reside within the United States, one lives in England, and one lives in South Africa. For more detailed information, see appendix.

Thematic Analysis

To supplement the lack of academic research investigating the postsecondary experiences of Black autistic students, I analyzed 3 TikTok videos developed by 22 Black autistic content creators, either attending postsecondary institutions or speaking retrospectively about their

academic experiences. The analysis yielded five themes and four subthemes. Please note that I will not sanitize the quotes and will keep original language (e.g., cursing, etc.).

Social Identity

Individuals with intersecting and marginalized identities balance conflicting cultural, physical, and social identities within themselves and in different situations (Lovelock, 2022). For Black autistic individuals, this balancing act often involves the practice of masking, or hiding certain aspects of oneself to conform to societal expectations. Within disabled identity theory, physical and social credibility are inherently attached to the disabled person's capital, identity and sense of self. This means that for a Black autistic person, there is a constant negotiation between being perceived as credible within the Black community, where there may be unique expectations and norms, and within the broader society, which often holds different and conflicting sets of expectations. The act of masking thus becomes a survival strategy, a means of protecting oneself from prejudice and discrimination. However, these discrepancies cause stress, which individuals attempt to resolve by changing aspects of their identity to survive (Pearson & Rose, 2021). For instance, one content creator states that their "masked self is a carefully curated survival tactic, that everyone who's known me before the diagnosis knows me as" (Daturajonez, 2023). Similarly, Jennifer (2024) states:

With me, I feel like I've never had the opportunity to be myself. Even when I was living at home with my parents growing up as a child, and the only time I felt like I could be myself was when I was alone, but I still never had a lot of privacy...Like I come from an immigrant family, so they had standards for me. So, if my autistic traits did show, I would get punished for my autistic traits growing up, so I learned to just suppress them and not show them to anyone. (Jennifer, 2024)

Our identities are composed of multiple factors, such as our race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability status, personality traits, and interest. As a result, we lean on different aspects of our identity as we navigate through environments and contexts based on its perceived

relevance to the group we are in and/or the current situation. Therefore, to avoid stigma, individuals carefully monitor their behavior. The above quotes depict this phenomenon perfectly, in that these individuals, due to their multiple identities, felt like they could not be their true authentic selves, unless they were alone. They masked, not only in the company of their friends, but also to their family members.

The content creator, Jennifer (2024), further describes her identity struggles and the perception of not feeling Black enough in elementary- through high school:

...When I was in school - middle school, high school, elementary school, the number one thing people liked to say is that I acted white. Everyone was like, 'oh Jennifer acts white. She's the whitest Black girl you'll ever fucking meet'... And it really messed with me and my identity as a Black woman. It made me look at myself like I was not Black enough; and sometimes I would have to overcompensate and act a certain way just so I could feel like the other Black kids' um would feel like I was one of them. Because they were saying I was trying to be white so bad that it really affected my identity as a Black woman inherently. Who I am and how I'm showing up is not socially normal for a Black woman and that just fucked up my whole perception of how I looked at myself. (Jennifer, 2024)

Even though Jennifer (2024) reported being undiagnosed at this time in her life, her peers marginalized her because her interests were not stereotypic of that of a Black person. In her attempt to “pass” as normal, she learned to suppress certain aspects of her identity and adopt alternative behaviors in hopes that her peers would accept her.

Many creators described masking in the context of their education. For example, Chris (2021), a medical student studying in Spain, realizes that they mask when they study, even if they're studying alone:

I mask academically. So, I'm in med school and right now we're studying for an exam. It has basically 14...chapters with like seminars and blah blah blah. And I realized I mask my autistic traits when I have to study...But like I will - I literally just realized I do this I suppress myself from studying the way I want to, like I won't listen to the same song on repeat because that's weird or I would listen to a specific genre because that's like, I have like literally manipulated and masked myself into how I study. (Chris, 2021).

Her quote highlights the deep impact that masking has on one's identity formation. To avoid the perception of being visibly autistic, Chris learned to hide her differences, even when she was studying alone. It appears Chris became so attuned to her autistic traits; her masking became automatic. Masking, to this extent, is exhausting and stressful, as well as associated with depression, anxiety, and poorer self-image (Radulski, 2022). A content creator by the name Kenna (2023) describes just how exhausting masking in university can be: “When you feel a meltdown coming on after a good day at uni because it's still 8 hours of masking.”

Reclaiming One's Identity

While many content creators spoke about having to mask to appear less autistic to their peers, some spoke of their journey of learning to unmask and becoming comfortable in their identity. For instance, Jennifer states (2024): “...I can actually show up like the person that I am instead of suppressing everything, because once I got out of my parents' household, and I was able to basically have my own autonomy and figure out myself” (2024). This quote expresses Jennifer's sense of liberation and self-discovery after leaving their parents' home. It highlights how gaining independence allowed her to stop suppressing her true self and express and embrace their genuine identity.

Racial Capitalism and Autistic Burnout

Historically, capitalism has been influenced by the forces of racism and nationalism. Determined by the formation of social and ideological compositions, the development of capitalism has assumed its perspectives during feudalism (Robinson, 2000). The patterns of recruitment for slavery and mercenaries have held true for hundreds of years. For instance, the bourgeoisie that led to the development of capitalism were drawn from particular cultural and ethnic groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its

peasants from other cultures as well; and its slaves from entirely different worlds (Robinson, 2000). Through capitalism, Europeans sought to differentiate themselves through the exaggeration of regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences, and turning them into racial differences. These racial differences have persisted and are rooted in our civilization itself.

In contemporary research, scholars such as Lui and colleagues (2023) and Biscontin (2021) have described racial capitalism as a process by which people secure some form of value from the racial identities of others. Historically, this practice was tied to the system of slavery, where Black people were forced to generate wealth without receiving any payment for their labor. The use of African slave labour aided in the development and formation of our current commercial and industrial capitalist system. Cedric Robinson (2000) advances racial capitalism by arguing that capitalism inherently relies on the exploitation and racialization of non-European peoples. He posits that capitalism did not emerge in a racially neutral context but was intertwined with racial hierarchies from its inception. According to Robinson (2000), racial capitalism extends beyond slavery and continues to shape the contemporary economic and social structures by disproportionately extracting value from marginalized racial groups while maintaining systemic inequities. This perspective highlights how racial identities remain commodified in modern capitalist societies, perpetuating racialized labor and economic disparities. Current manifestation of colonial racial capitalism is in the form of Jim Crow laws and underfunded schools, which perpetuate systemic inequalities, limit access to quality education and economic opportunities for marginalized communities, maintaining social hierarchy that benefits the privileged at the expense of others.

Today, the experiences and identities of Black people in the Americas, Africa, and the diaspora are linked to Western notions and impositions of time. Although time often operates as

an invisible force, Black people have always been aware of its presence, as a method of survival. From chattel slavery to this present moment, Black people have navigated and negotiated Western concepts of time by employing alternative Black temporality (King, 2024). Colored People Time (CPT), as described by John Streamas (2010), is understood as a satirical rationalization of lateness, as people of color often have a relaxed orientation towards movement to resist white-capitalist structures that require people to be productive with their time. Black people have worked to undermine concepts of time that are organized by whiteness and fueled by wealth for white people through exploitation, displacement and dispossession of Black people. (Miles, 2023; Liu et al., 2023).

Many of the content creators seemed to grapple with the notion of time and productivity, and simply not feeling productive enough, particularly related to their experiences of autistic burnout. Capitalism has made us believe that as humans we only have two options, (1) work from a place of disconnection and exhaustion, or (2) make space for rest while fearing for our survival. This inflexible binary, in addition to the ever-present possibility of poverty, keeps us in a state of restlessness and hustling to survive (Hersey, 2022). In trying to exist in a society that values productivity over health and wellness, content creators often spoke of their inability to take care of themselves in a way that honors their body. Black autistic content creators, who also have minoritized sexual and gender identities, may experience autistic burnout at higher rates than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts (Miller, 2018). Due to the compounded oppressions of racism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia, such individuals are caught in cycles of overexertion and inadequate self-care. The constant pressure to produce and conform to societal expectations leaves little room to recover from burnout or tend to their physical and mental

health in ways that genuinely honor all their identities. For instance, Minyarn (2022) describes their experience of being a Black autistic transgender postsecondary student:

It is incredibly depressing being in college and being autistic. I see so many videos on my For You Page (TikTok), talking about how neurodivergent is this amazing thing, that sets us apart from the world; and quite frankly I can't find any pros in it. The crippling anxiety alone, just prevents me from doing damn-near everything. But juggling trying to do good in school, good in my sport, maintain mental health - it's just a joke. I'm too tired to cook. Sometimes I just feel too tired and sad to eat to be honest. I feel like I've used every ounce of energy that I have just to get through school - I'm not sure if I have enough energy to do anything afterwards. (Minyarn, 2022).

In this quote, Minyarn describes the depressing experiences of being a Black autistic college student juxtaposed with popular TikTok content that tends to frame neurodiversity as a beautiful, quirky characteristic. For Minyarn, being autistic, transgender, and Black is an exhausting existence, which makes sense as such individuals are more likely to mask or present a carefully curated version of themselves to avoid further stigmatization and discrimination (Cohen et al., 2022). Masking often leads to burnout, which Minyarn articulates in the quote above.

Many content creators spoke of the difficulty they have juggling all their responsibilities. Being a student, an athlete, and maintaining a good level of mental health is hard, but it is harder when you must balance multiple marginalized identities on top of all those things as well. In addition to experiencing stigmatization, multiply marginalized identities lead to poorer health outcomes (Reinka et al., 2020). Dee (2024), a Black autistic and transgender content creator, articulates their experience of being disabled and working full time with a manager that who does not understand disability:

...and I'm only inconsistent when I'm struggling for my fucking life. And when I'm struggling to get out of fucking bed, i'm not gonna clock in on fucking time. I have bigger things to worry about, like being able to get out of bed in the fucking morning... At some point people with disabilities may have inconsistent job issues. That's why they're called disabilities. Period, Deborah, like Yeah, I'm inconsistent. my brain is

fucking fried. like you're the only one I have to come to you about this. I'm the only one on staff with autism. I'm the only one on staff with autism and ADHD. I'm the only one on staff with autism, ADHD, and OCD. So yeah, I'm not going to be consistent all the fucking time. When I have so much going on in this little head of mine. (Dee, 2024).

In this quote, Dee highlights the intersection of ableism and racism. They convey that their perceived inconsistencies are not the result of personal shortcomings but the overwhelming challenges of daily life. When stating, “I'm only inconsistent when I'm struggling for my fucking life,” they make it clear that their difficulties with consistency are a result of more significant struggles with their disabilities and mental health. Dee continues to describe how societal expectations often fail to account for the realities of those with disabilities while simultaneously drawing our attention to their isolating experiences as the only disabled transgender person in their workplace. Not only does Dee's quote call for more accommodations and a greater understanding of neurodivergence and disability in the workplace, but this quote also draws our attention to the intersection of race and disability and the exploitative structure of labour. The framework of racial capitalism helps to explain how Dee's struggles are not just individual but are rooted in a system that prioritizes profit and productivity over the well-being of marginalized workers (Robinson, 2000).

Similarly, Jentok40 expresses her struggles to go to work, where she describes that during her commute, she often experiences intrusive thoughts pertaining to suicidal ideation:

...And I have especially noticed that while I'm in like a car or a bus and Uber on my way to my job, I'll have really intense intrusive thoughts like a little bit of a trigger warning the next part, but I'll be thinking like, ‘Oh, my God, I wish this bus would like flip over and I wish I could get in an accident right now.’ I honestly don't wish that I very much think it's an intrusive thought because it's something that repeats in my head... I can tell it's coming from those feelings of anxiety about like just not not feeling alright with going to work because it's such a huge demand and such a huge task. (Jentok40, 2023).

These kinds of thoughts are unsurprising, especially within a racist and capitalist system such as ours, where every person has a price tag based on their skillset, experience, and level of

education. Moreover, simply existing as a multiply marginalized individual in a predominantly white educational institution is exhausting. Capitalism relies on the need for able body-minded workers to ensure economic production and profit, disabled people are seen as burdensome, and often treated as such. One queer content creator, Kai (2021), described this as a form of violence associated with Black autistic adulthood, and relates it back to grind culture.

There is something particularly violent about entering adulthood as an autistic person with a pervasive drive for autonomy. It seems like the people around me are getting a much better grasp of going 'oh this is just what it is, you just gotta do it.' and I'm still stuck in the 'this is abusive.' Like, I know that we aren't children anymore, but growing up doesn't equate to confining ourselves and restricting ourselves this fucking hard. Like, I try to make myself more disciplined but at the end of the day, my body is the god that I have to report to. And if it wants to rest, it's gonna make me fucking rest. (Kai, 2021)

In this quote, Kai speaks to the unique challenges Black autistic individuals face as they transition into adulthood. The tension between societal expectations of adulthood and Kai's need for personal autonomy, further complicated by their autistic and queer identities, captures how the transition to adulthood can feel oppressive and abusive for someone who is autistic. These feelings of violence reflect the pressure to conform to the rigid expectations of discipline, productivity, and self-regulation, all in the name of capitalism. Further highlighting how capitalism prioritizes productivity over well-being, especially for marginalized people who are already exploited in the labor market. Powerfully, Kai rejects the capitalist expectation to push beyond personal limits to meet societal expectations by stating, "My body is a god that I have to report to." Kai's awareness of their body's limitation and need for rest is viewed as resistance to capitalism.

The constant need to work and produce often results in autistic burnout, characterized by withdrawal, exhaustion, executive functioning problems, and an increased manifestation of autistic traits (Higgins et al., 2021). Typically, autistic burnout is linked to masking, and the

exhaustion of behaving ‘normal’ in a world that’s unaccommodating. The content creator, Camonghne Felix (2024), describes this experience well: “Whenever I did go to lunchtime in the cafeteria, the next period I was exhausted because I spent the entire period masking, manic, jumping from table to table, pretending that I was there in the present. I was depressed” (2024). Unfortunately, masking has severe consequences, as depicted by Jennifer, who describes her experience of autistic burnout:

...And every single time I feel like I'm about to be burnt out, I get kind of scared because I don't know how long that period is going to be for because sometimes it's like six months, sometimes three months, sometimes a month, sometimes the week, and I literally don't know how to get out of it. I just have to wait until my body is like, okay, fine, we're good. Let's start, you know, living our lives again. And then my body's like, Let's live our life again. And then I feel so bad when I am in burnout because then I feel like I'm wasting my life. Because all I do is bed-rot. Like I don't do anything at all. I wake up in the morning, I stay in bed, I go eat food, and I go right back to bed like I don't do anything and sometimes that will last for months. Where I just will not do anything at all. (Jennifer, 2024)

In this quote, Jennifer articulates the fear of becoming burnt-out, and how once you’re in it, it is hard to know when you will be out of that state. Research on autistic burnout is still growing, but it is generally described as coping with the daily demands of life in an unaccommodated neurotypical world (Arnold et al., 2023; Higgins et al., 2021). The symptoms that Jennifer mentions (e.g., staying in bed) are common amongst those who have experienced autistic burnout (Arnold et al., 2023). However, having a better understanding of autistic burnout, can ensure that individuals like Jennifer can thrive without being overwhelmed by their environment. Similarly, Nonbinarygremlin (2024), a non-binary Black autistic graduate student, talks about their experience of going nonverbal because of their autistic burnout:

You know, it's kind of weird going nonverbal. So yesterday, I woke up early, and I could not speak. Now let me rephrase it, I had the ability to talk, but the energy for it. It felt like my throat was in a constricting and binding chain. And the best way to put it is that sometimes when I'm overwhelmed, sometimes when I burn all my spoons - like socializing to an extreme, I don't talk. I lose my ability to talk...What if this happens if

I'm trying to teach a class? How am I supposed to explain this to my students, that 'hey your future professor is having one of those days.' And it's concerning that I lost that ability to speak, in a sense. (Nonbinarygremlin, 2024)

The stress of living in an unaccommodating neurotypical world caused Nonverbalgremlin (2024) to become burnt out. Additionally, existing as a queer person in a hetero-patriarchal institution that hosts several traditional gender-segregated spaces can be dangerous and exclusionary for gender diverse persons (McGuire et al., 2021). Contributing to the further marginalization of those who do not fit into binary gender norms, forcing them to navigate environments that often invalidate their identities or make them vulnerable to discrimination and harm (Thorpe, 2022). While the Nonbinarygremlin did not explicitly state their queer identity as a source of stress, their experience within exclusionary environments likely contributed to their feelings of anxiety, making it harder for them to thrive within their academic institution. To regulate their body and emotions, Nonbinarygremlin describe resting as a form of resistance: “And as the day progressed, I tried to eat, sleep, rest, and did nothing but that. I was able to gain some of that energy back. And even now, I'm at 70%, I was at 55% yesterday - and I'm being generous here” (Nonbinarygremlin, 2024). Hersey (2022) positions rest to be a form of resistance, as it challenges the forces of capitalism and white supremacy. The system of capitalism has manipulated us into a perpetual state of exhaustion and trauma. However, resting allows space, and with space we can heal and reconnect with our bodies.

Resistance and Resilience

It is common for autistic students to find postsecondary life challenging, especially considering the academic and social demands. To combat this, many of the TikTok content creators had advice on how to succeed socially and academically during their post-secondary degree, and how to combat autistic meltdowns. Additionally, these content creators offered

advice pertaining to succeeding in the workplace, functioning as an autistic adult, their journey to becoming an advocate, and unlearning their internalized ableism.

Succeeding in School

The transition for adolescence to early adulthood can be particularly challenging for young adults with autism. For many, this period of change is exacerbated by inadequate support, services, and opportunities. During this transitional period, many autistic adults undertake higher education (Lambe et al., 2019). However, scholars estimate only 38.8% of autistic postsecondary students successfully graduate (Viezel et al., 2020). These problems are likely related to non-academic factors of university life, including difficulty coping with the lack of structure and predictability of university activities, difficulty engaging with academic work, and trouble interacting with peers and staff (Siew et al., 2017). One content creator, Raven Derose (2023), articulates why she thinks higher education fails autistic students. She states:

The education system really fails people with autism and autistic individuals because there are so many rules and guidelines that don't really help people. Especially if you're dealing with disabilities, learning disabilities, it's really hard to just automatically expect people like us to know what we're doing and what we should be doing; and I think those expectations are really harmful instead of helpful. There have been so many times where teachers and professors have been like 'oh you should've known that, you should've automatically known to look like known where to look to find the information you need. (Raven Derose, 2023)

Expecting disabled students to intuitively understand where to find necessary information is unrealistic, as disabled students often face other barriers that make it challenging to access information and navigate environments without accommodations (Timmerman & Mulvihill, 2015). Websites, classrooms, and instructional material are not always designed with accessibility, limiting one's ability to find or understand necessary information. Many educational systems and resources are not designed inclusively, meaning that disabled students might require additional guidance, tools, or support to access this information (Wilson, 2017).

Additionally, disabled students have diverse needs and experiences, and a one-size-fits-all approach to providing information can be ineffective (Stafford et al., 2017). Without tailored support, these students are likely to struggle. Moreover, when instructors assume that all students should come to university with a certain level of information, it can lead to unfair judgments, and additional stress for those who need more guidance and support.

As a form of resilience, the Black autistic TikTok community had a lot of content around sharing ways to succeed in university and college. One content creator, Chris (2023), is an American international medical student and she shares an abundance of advice around studying. A lot of Chris's (2023) content is centered around empowering the neurodivergent community to be comfortable in their own skin, use their autistic or ADHD traits to their advantage, and navigate the world with confidence and self-assurance. Through sharing her personal experiences, practical tips and supportive advice, Chris (2023) fosters a sense of belonging and resilience within the neurodivergent community, empowering other autistic students to be comfortable in their differences. In one video, she explains how she functions as an unmasked ADHD and autistic medical student. She says to remember the three S's. The first 'S,' stands for snacks: "...snacks are important because when you are neurodivergent, your brain works at high levels constantly. It's part of the problem - we cannot filter information; we get tired faster. By snacking you are giving your brain energy, you are staying awake" (2023).

The second 'S,' stands for stimming:

...You are going to take stim breaks, you're going to go to the bathroom, get in the stall, take the big stall if you can, as that is the easiest place to have big stimming sessions in without feeling like people are staring at you. And in the small stall it's a lot harder to do a big stimming session in-between class. You need to figure out a way to stim between classes, because if you don't you will be burnt out by the end of the day. Self-accommodate. You can stim in class, as long as you don't have strict professors or strict teachers. If you need to crochet in class to pay attention, that is what you are going to do.

Sit at the back of class and crochet. Self-accommodate! This does not mean that you don't stim after or between classes. You do both. you stim during and after. (Chris, 2023)

The third 'S,' stands for special interest:

You need to integrate your special interest into your school. How do you do that? Notebooks, sticky notes on laptop or notebooks, uhm special interest merch, wear it to school, put pins and keychains on your backpacks, your socks - special interest stuff. You see what I'm saying? You can integrate your special interest while going to class every day! My nails are of special interest - the whole school year my nails are going to be on point, why? Because having nice nails makes me productive...You just need to find ways to integrate your special interest...Another thing I do between classes is keep my headphones in. I'm watching Marvel, I'm watching Pride and Prejudice. If I don't feel like talking, it's special interest time. 10 minutes of special interest's time. You can integrate your special interests into your curriculum. When you need to learn something, relate it back to your special interests. (Chris, 2023)

In these passages Chris (2023) emphasizes the importance of taking stim breaks during the day to avoid autistic burnout. To do this, she utilizes the larger bathroom stalls for stimming sessions between classes, and if necessary, she advises her views to stim during class in a discrete manner, like crocheting. She finds that incorporating her special interest into her school routine is helpful. This can include things like using notebooks, sticky notes, and merchandise related to your special interest. Wearing special interest-themed items and keeping headphones in to watch related content during class can help you stay engaged. Another content creator, Dr. Kofi (2023), describes having an autistic meltdown on her college campus and what she did to help herself in that moment, as well as advice to help others who have similar experiences,

I once had a meltdown in public...I was on my college campus, and I was just walking around the Barnes and Noble, like crying, and I was so tired, I didn't really care what anyone thought. So, I just went to the bathroom stall and, like, chilled out for a minute. But if you're in public, bathroom stall is a good option, especially if the bathroom is empty. Maybe step outside, if you can, if there aren't a ton of people buzzing around. The main idea is that you want to get someplace quiet and preferably dark, like a closet or somewhere else quiet and dark to escape. Try to take deep breaths. Try to pinpoint what caused you to have the meltdown. Remember to stim and sometimes squeezing myself really helps. (Dr. Kofi, 2023)

This passage addresses the practical strategies and coping mechanism for managing public meltdowns. Dr. Kofi's (2023) personal anecdote of a meltdown on college campus highlights the emotion and physical exhaustion that accompanies autistic postsecondary students. Recognizing when a meltdown may happen, and having ways to calm yourself in the moment is essential for success. Autistic students are more likely to drop out of university, as they face challenges regarding their university environment (Cage & McManemy, 2022). Universities are often full of sensory stimuli that can produce and perpetuate dysregulation for autistic individuals, and while having a structured and predictable environment reduces the likelihood of dysregulation, that may not be feasible in a university setting (Lachance, 2024). Therefore, knowing your coping strategies is necessary skill as a postsecondary student.

Cleopatra (2022), a queer Black autistic student offers advice to autistics who struggle to concentrate on specific tasks while studying:

So, the first tip that I want to give you is to clear the space of anything that you think is unsafe. Whether that might be something that's distracting to you, maybe it's food or smell that you don't like it. Could be a person. Make sure that you're safe, your space is really safe. So that way you communicate the idea to your body and your mind that you have an area in which you can focus. Tip number two, I would definitely say is to bring in on your safe items. So, for me, that's my favorite sweater. I usually prefer to listen to music... for me that's classical music. Another thing is I like to keep, and this is tip number three. I really like to keep little rewards for myself along the way. (Cleopatra, 2022)

Cleopatra finds it important to ensure that your studying environment feels safe so that your body and mind recognize it as a place for concentration. Similarly, Jentok40 (2023) offers advice on how to take notes:

Okay, the number one thing is to practice increasing your attention span. It sucks but the brain is a muscle and if you're not used to consuming long form content for like 30 minutes to an hour at a time listening to a lecture and trying to extract all that information and also simultaneously write down what's important is really hard. So I think a great way to practice this is watching like YouTube video essays, listening to like longer podcasts or like watching movies that you love as a kid, especially if they have like

autistic characters in them, or characters that you think you might be able to see because you can take notes on that and that's an easy way to practice. (Jentok40, 2023).

Doing things such as practicing consuming longer forms of content and taking notes can be helpful to those who struggle with concentration. In a similar fashion, many of the content creators offered advice around how to function as an adult and stay regulated. For example, Raven Derose (2023) updates her followers on what it's like to exist as an autistic adult, which ultimately makes it easier for her to excel in school. She says:

Okay so update on being an adult with autism cause honestly because like every day is like a full-on battle or challenge to just basically do your adult things and like getting up, doing like chores, having a routine, [inaudible] and just doing what I need to do to survive has been kinda like a challenge. And honestly, I've learned so much and I'm so proud of how far along I've gotten because I honestly didn't think that I would make it this far and I think it's super cool.... Being an adult with autism is a continuous challenge, as everyday feels like a battle to manage basic adult responsibilities, such as getting up, doing chores, maintaining a routine, and just doing what's necessary to survive. (Raven Derose, 2023).

Like, Raven Derose (2023), many autistic adults have low levels of educational attainment (White et al., 2016), and often struggle to transition into adulthood, further impacting their ability to succeed in a postsecondary environment. In fact, it is quite common for autistic postsecondary students to state that the lack of supports for social and emotion difficulties, as well as independent living are major challenges in their college and university experiences (Van Hees et al., 2014; Gelbar et al., 2015; Cai & Richdale, 2016).

Establishing Connections and Making Friends

Many of the content creators reported social challenges. Considering that the core of autism is characterized by social and communicative difficulties, this is unsurprising. Transitioning into a postsecondary institution can be challenging, as students must cope with living independently, new routines, and adapting to many changes, further impacting their difficulty. As a result, autistic students report heightened loneliness, social isolation, bullying,

and stigmatization relative to their non-autistic peers (Gurbuz et al., 2018; Lambe et al., 2018; Hillier et al., 2017). Many of the content creators experienced alienation and feelings of loneliness, throughout their education. The content creator, EJ (2022), who also identifies as non-binary, reflects on their time as a student and describes themselves as alien-like: “I feel so out of place from everyone. I try so hard to connect, but I can't seem to hold a fucking conversation. I'm so awkward, I can't stand it. Someone, please help me. I don't know how to engage with people - I'm a wreck; or maybe a weird alien... a really bad one, at that.”

Within this same video, EJ (2022) further describes feeling left-out even among the friendships they do form:

Everyone in the group seems to be growing closer effortlessly and I want those connections so badly; but it seems as though, no matter how hard I try, people don't want to be my friend. I'm forever on the outside and I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I've rarely been able to maintain long term friendships... I never had any friends that would come hang out in my dorm room, or ask me for advice, or who I felt like I could confide in. I had friends that I would be close to for maybe a few months or maybe a year and then seemingly out of nowhere, we would just stop talking, and I had no idea why. (EJ, 2022)

The theme of bullying and isolation was consistent across all content creators. It is common for autistic youth to experience exclusion more than their typically developing peers (Kwan et al., 2020). This prevalence of experienced loneliness continues into adulthood as well (Elmose, 2019), with descriptive themes of loneliness and isolation consistently emerging as a theme in studies with autistic adults (Elmose, 2019). We see more examples of bullying in the quote below:

When I was in elementary school, people - if they knew you were in special ed they weren't gonna be friends with you, they didn't wanna touch you um you know like one time, I will - um they would make fun of me, they would talk about me, they would tease me all the time y'all. I would cry all the time y'all and be so hurt. Which I think that's so weird that nobody like clocked the ableism back then. But I guess nobody cared. (TheBlackgenderfluidhoe, 2023)

While bullying is a national problem (Augustine et al., 2024), Theblackgenderfluidhoe's quote contextualizes what it is like to be disabled, Black, and queer in an academic setting. Because of their disability, none of their peers wanted to touch them, let alone play with them. However, this is not surprising, as research has found that Black students are 32% more likely to be victims of bullying (Gage et al., 2021), and individuals with disabilities, both with and without a diagnosis, are at higher risk of being bullied (Augustine et al., 2022). Additionally, queer youth of color experience more symptoms of depression, isolation, and loneliness than their white queer counterparts (Lardler et al., 2020). Becoming a victim of bullying is not random either; research states that children who have queer identities, sensory disabilities, difficulties with social relations, and intellectual disabilities are at an elevated risk of being bullied (Veenstra & Huitsing, 2021; Maiano et al., 2016; Lardler et al., 2020). Intersectionality compounds the effect of bullying, exclusion, and discrimination. This intersectional disadvantage leaves these students without adequate support systems, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

TheBlackgenderfluidhoe goes on to relate these past experiences with their peers, to their current experience of being in college and trying to make friends there. They state, "uh like being now, being autistic and in college is still really hard, I'm not gonna lie. It's really pressuring, like the social shit and all everything else" (TheBlackgenderfluidhoe, 2023). They are not alone in these feelings of social isolation, especially within the context of postsecondary school, where many autistic students experience loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Weiss & Pamela, 2015). Similarly, Autistic Pikachu (2023) asserts: "My entire life I was labeled weird. I remember getting kicked out of my friendship group in primary school for being weird. I hated school in general because I was reminded on a daily basis how weird or strange I was by other kids/teenagers."

To combat feelings of isolation, alienation, and loneliness, especially as they relate to academia, many content creators offered guidance to their fellow Black autistics on how to make friends. For example, Datura Jonez (2023) talks about her experience of the trauma that comes with making friends, and advice to help ensure that other can make quality friendships:

Coming from someone who has always struggled to make friends, has a lot of friendship trauma, and is also autistic, you have to be your own best friend before you go out here and try to make friends. Here's why: when you are so hungry for friendship, which is completely natural, you start operating from a place of lack. And anytime you operate from a place of lack it does not go well. And those who have ill intent can sniff out people who are desperate for connection. By becoming your own best friend...if everyone in the world turned their back on you, you would still have yourself and love being with yourself. By doing this you are more likely to make quality friendships, you are more likely to vet the people who are trying to befriend you, or you're trying to befriend, and it helps prevent you from putting all your eggs in one basket. You can be your own best friend by treating yourself nice, going places alone, finding out what hobbies you truly enjoy. (Datura Jonez, 2023)

Comparably, Jennifer (2024) explains how she was able to develop quality friendships: “So now and now that I accept my autism, I have individual friendships. So, none of my friends are friends with each other...So I'd rather have individual connections instead of group connections if you get what I'm saying.” For Jennifer (2024), staying away from group dynamics and developing individual and meaningful relationships worked best for her. Jennifer (2024) goes on to articulate that this advice contrasts with the advice that is typically given:

And then when I think about like, building community and how like, well, you kind of must have a group of people together to build community. That part of community building makes me extremely anxious, because I think about maybe possibly being ostracized in a group of people. Because that has happened to me before. (Jennifer, 2024).

Often autistic people are given advice by neurotypicals and are forced to fit within their binary of what is ‘normal.’ However, Jennifer (2024) makes an important distinction of doing what typically works best for her, instead of building a community in a manner that makes more sense to others. This advice is especially powerful because it is common for autistic people to

experience social isolation. In many instances, and to feel belonging, autistic individuals may be pressured to conform to societal norms and do things that make them uncomfortable (Grace et al., 2022). Jennifer empowers her listeners to be themselves.

Employment Success

Employment is a significant contributing factor to quality of life (Harmuth et al., 2018). Although many adults with autism would like to work, they often face significant challenges entering the workforce and maintaining meaningful employment, reflected by high rates of under- and unemployment (Scott et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2015; Hedley et al., 2017). For instance, the unemployment rate for autistic adults is estimated to be 66% (Harmuth et al., 2018). Additionally, studies have illustrated that people on the spectrum are usually poorly paid with limited working hours (Chen et al., 2015). In the workplace, a formal autism diagnosis may result in a person experiencing a social stigma. Moreover, individuals who have not received a formal diagnosis may also be stigmatized, as any characteristics of autism may distinguish them from their coworkers (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020). For instance, Datura Jonez (2023) talks in detail about her experience in the workplace:

As an autistic person. I've been bullied in every single setting, schools, workplaces, community groups, and this includes like my grad program like I was bullied a lot in my grad program.... Like if you're bullied in your workplace that impacts your survival. Like directly impacts your pay bills. And it's so fascinating because people will swear people with mental illness or people with autism are able bodied and now, we can work just like everybody else. But then you put us in those settings, and we're bullied because we're different and we don't understand social cues and we need more time to do things which irritates the y'all and leads to our burnout and our ability to survive. (Datura Jonez, 2023)

When individuals with autism enter work environments, they frequently encounter bullying due to their differences. These differences can irritate colleagues, leading to further torment and creating a hostile work environment. As a result, individuals with autism experience

increased stress and burnout, which diminishes their ability to maintain employment and, consequently, their ability to survive financially. For instance, Datura Jonez (2023) recalls her experience of employment after graduating from college:

And speaking of autistic burnout, autistic burnout can be very dangerous in the workplace because of things like meltdowns. I'll never forget I was being trained for my first job out of college, and the girl who was training me was snapping at me. Because we were sorting out paperwork and I'm the type of person like I said, I don't really understand sequences or sequences, like confused me rather. So, I have a very particular way of doing things and I have to do that, or things won't make sense - things won't get done. So, she messed up the whole little sequence and me being on the verge of autistic burnout I yelled back at her. You know, you're not gonna talk to me like that. And she got scared, and she used that to bully me further and eventually I quit. (Datura Jonez, 2023)

This situation highlights the severe consequences of workplace bullying, neurotypical expectations, ableism, and the need for greater support and understanding for individuals with autism. Another content creator, DreeziusMaximus (2024), expresses their struggle with concealing their autism, especially in a professional context:

I can't afford to keep pretending I'm not autistic anymore. I can't afford it, especially in the context of a job. I fully understand the discrimination that we will face when you hit that checkbox when you apply. But I'm at a point where managing expectations is becoming so crucial for me to ensure that I don't have the job hop every six months to a year to ensure that there's at least some slight understanding when I do get hired that this person is weird. (DreeziusMaximus, 2024)

DreeziusMaximus (2024) has learned to conceal his autism due to fear of discrimination and being perceived as less capable. Misunderstanding and stereotypes about autism often result in prejudice, making it challenging for individuals to excel in the workplace. Concealing their condition helps them align with neurotypical expectations and avoid being seen as unprofessional or difficult. Despite his efforts to fit in and avoid discrimination, DreeziusMaximus (2024) seemed to experience bigotry in the workplace:

So, I'm autistic and my boss is trying to get me fired. These people, it's like, we're not the same kind of human. They're so vindictive. They plan their wrath. You know what I mean? They store it up and they punish you when you're honest. And when you're

autistic, it's extremely difficult to navigate that - I've never successfully figured it out. I've been job hopping every six months to a year at pretty much every job I've ever worked at before. Because there always ends up being some issue with management, some issue with my coworkers, people will lie on you. People will intentionally misrepresent you. People will go out of their way to hurt you. They hate you, and it's like they don't have any way to moderate that hatred. My internal compass makes me an easy pushover. It makes it very easy to hurt me. (DreeziusMaximus, 2024).

Without proper support and understanding from employers, the stress and pressure of hiding one's autism can result in burnout, stress, social isolation, bullying, decreased productivity, and in this case, losing your job. Unfortunately, this is the reality for many autistic adults in the workplace.

On platforms like TikTok, Black autistic creators are increasingly offering advice to help other autistic individuals navigate and maintain employment in the workplace. For instance, one content creator, Brandeezy (2023) gives great advice on maintaining employment. His first piece of advice is:

Knowing your symptoms and what specific things trigger you will be one of the biggest helps you have. Because then you can mentally have yourself or coach yourself through tough situations and if you need to step away for a second you can so that you can regroup. Just being self-aware is one of the greatest things that helped me when I started working full time. (Brandeezy, 2023)

His second piece of advice:

Second, start trying to manage your comorbidities. Whether those things be anxiety, ADHD, bipolar disorder, PTSD, if it's possibly get with your nearest therapist or your nearest physician. If you need medication, if you need therapy, that's gonna be one of your biggest things. Cause once you know how the other comorbidities interact with autism, that'll better help you mitigate those effects. Also, if possible, have special interest stuff on hand, so if you are able to read books, like on breaks, or if you have things to listen to at your job. (Brandeezy, 2023)

His third piece of advice is:

Next if you're able or if you have the ability to choose a career path that will be best for you, do that. So, if you know you can't do retail try to find a job that you know has minimal interactions with the public or something you know is quiet enough uh you know for you to manage your own pace. I know a lot of times, like working retail or

working in these kinds of jobs, really isn't the best for people who are autistic. The sensory overload, the noise, the multiple social interactions on a regular basis can all be things that help you push you off into, you know, the deep end. (Brandeezy, 2023)

In these quotes, Brandeezy (2023) draws a lot of attention to self-awareness and management of your autistic symptoms in the context of employment. Self-awareness of what triggers you allows you to coach yourself through challenges and take necessary breaks to regroup and perform your best. He also draws attention to managing comorbidities such as anxiety, ADHD, and depression by seeking help from therapists or physicians, to better understand how these interact with autism. Additionally, incorporating your special interest into your workplace can help reduce stress and anxiety, as these items allow you to relax and feel comforted. Moreover, choosing a career path that suits your strengths and minimizes stressors, such as ensuring you don't work a highly stimulating job that could lead to sensory overload and frequent social interactions.

Opportunity Gap

Educational disparities and intergenerational economic inequality are greatly correlated with race, ethnicity, linguistic and social class status (Welner & Prudence, 2013). The disparities in achievement indicators produce significant differences on out-of-school factors such as health, housing, nutrition, and safety. Vast opportunity gaps limit children's prospects, as they are not reaching their full potential because they are not receiving meaningful and equitable opportunities to reach that potential. Many of the content creators talked about their school experiences through their elementary- to postsecondary education. For instance, Kayla Nicole (2023), who identifies as queer, Black and autistic, shares her experience as a postsecondary student: "So, I'm just going to school, anything like that and just you know trying to navigate my life after high school... I had to drop out of college. I was having money issues." This passage

reflects Kayla Nicole's (2023) struggles in transitioning from high school to the next phase of her life. This situation highlights the broader issue of how financial instability can disrupt educational pursuits and impact a person's ability to achieve their goals and build a stable future. Another creator, Camonghne Felix (2024), describes in detail what it was like to go to an underfunded high school as a Black autistic student:

Freshman year of high school, there were metal detectors, when I got to my homeroom kids were sitting on the floors on the radiators, there wasn't enough space, teachers were assholes. So, naturally I left, and I didn't go back. I cut school 100 days out of the year, literally... One of the deans, knowing that the teachers were my best friends, groomed me and tried to be in a relationship when I was 15. (Camonghne Felix, 2024)

She goes on to detail her commuting experience: "My trip to and from school, having to take two buses, sometimes a bus and a train, sometimes a bus and two trains was hell. I wanted to kill myself every single day, the noise the traffic, the people, how close people were. I wanted to kill myself, literally." This passage vividly describes the intense distress and overwhelming anxiety experienced by Camonghne Felix (2024), during their daily commute to and from school. The combination of taking multiple buses and trains, dealing with the noise, traffic and crowded spaces created a situation that was profoundly unbearable for them. The repeated emphasis on wanting to kill themselves underscores the severity of their emotional and psychological pain. It highlights the extreme impact that sensory overload and the stress of navigating public transportation can have on someone with autism. This passage serves as a stark reminder of the need for better support systems and accommodations for those who struggle existing in such environments

College Experiences

In the academic domain, students on the spectrum report higher levels of academic and social challenges than neurotypical students (McLeod et al., 2019; Anderson and Butt, 2017).

Poor academic performance of students on the spectrum could be attributed to characteristic limitations of autism, such as poor executive function. For example, Raven Derosé (2022) shares with her viewers that her autism doesn't allow her to study in groups or work with others on group projects. Over the years, group work has become more central to college courses.

However, it is common for students with autism to find these situations difficult as they often struggle with social communication, working in group settings, or navigating others work ethic.

Gab Tizzy (2024, 0:31) talks about her experience of starting assignments, and because of her autism and ADHD, she struggles to initiate certain actions: “I have such a hard time knowing how to get started, because I have that executive functioning piece too. So, then it gets perceived that I'm being lazy when I don't wanna put effort when really, I'm trying so hard to put effort.”

Similarly, Bbcutiee (2023) talks about her experience with finishing homework:

“Um, so after class, I would do home and I would be in my bedroom and I would just stay there and I would struggle through hours of homework - it probably took most people a short amount of time to complete - I often times would wait until last minute and I would schedule things based on how late I could do it before it was due. Because that was my only motivation to get things done. (Bbcutiee, 2023)

This example describes the speaker's experience with procrastination and their difficulty to manage homework. Bbcutiee (2023) mentions retreating to their bedroom and spending long hours struggling through homework and assignments that likely took others much less time to complete. It highlights the significant effort and stress they face in navigating their postsecondary education, emphasizing the disparity between their experience and that of their neurotypical peers.

Additionally, poor academic performance could reflect the stressful impact of sensory processing problems on day-to-day life. Sensitivity to noise was common among content creators

and impacted their ability to study comfortably on campus. One student, who had significant sensory issues relating to sound, articulated their experience studying on campus. She said:

Um, I never stayed on campus because there was just too much going on. Um, my parents would always be like 'why don't you go to the library and study!' And I can't, it's too loud. At my library there were different floors, and like the top floor you had to be really quiet and even the really quiet place if someone just walked by, I would hear it and be disturbed, and I just could not focus on doing schoolwork in that environment. And I couldn't feel comfortable in that environment just in general. (Bbcutiee, 2023)

Similarly, another student commented that sensory issues also impacted her ability to learn. She said:

...I love learning, I really really love learning, then with autism and then I'm having sensory issues I must focus on all the light and the way that's like refracting like - and then we have people talking over one another, you hear people in the hallway. Then I have to focus on the task at hand and the irritation from other people. (Gab Tizzy, 2024)

Many of autistic students seemed to lack academic support and understanding of what their postsecondary degree would be like. One student reflects her frustration and disillusionment with their college experience, particularly regarding curriculum structure. She said:

Firstly, I went into college completely unaware that I would have to go over the same courses I just took in high school, but more in-depth, before I could even do what I was more interested in. When I say that that annoyed the mess out of me...like I was so shocked. I was like, um I thought college was where you focus on what you're going to do for the rest of your life, not go over the same things again. (Bbcutiee, 2023)

Other students go on to critique higher education's shortcomings in supporting autistic students/

One student feels that universities impose numerous rules and guidelines that are not helpful, particularly for those with disabilities and learning differences. She said:

The education system really fails people with autism and autistic individuals because there are so many rules and guidelines that don't really help people. Especially if you're dealing with disabilities, learning disabilities, it's really hard to just automatically expect people like us to know what we're doing and what we should be doing; and I think those expectations are really harmful instead of helpful... There have been so many times where teachers and professors have been like 'oh you should've known that you should've automatically known to look like known where to look to find the information you need. (Raven Derose, 2023)

This student further commented that postsecondary staff fail assume that autistic students should automatically know where to find necessary information or how to perform certain tasks, despite this being their first experience in college and adulthood:

I'm sorry, this is my first time going to college, this is my first time as an adult at this age at this time in this moment. It's my first time, I don't know anything ha-ha. So, I really don't appreciate when the education system blames me for my ignorance when it's your job to teach me. I'm paying you to help me and you're not even helping me. Like that's my thing about the education system in general. (Raven Derose, 2023)

Another student reflects on his experience during college emphasizing both positive aspects and significant frustrations. While he appreciated his overall college experience, he encountered substantial difficulties with the availability and involvement of college advisors:

As much as I loved my collegiate experience, and appreciated all that it gave me, there are no more unavailable people in the world, except college advisors. Especially at an HBCU. It was only until my last two semesters where I got somebody who was actively involved or actively invested in making sure I got the classes I needed. Like, she was baffled that there were several classes that I hadn't taken, and she was like 'why didn't you have this on yours last semester?' (Brandeezy, 2023)

One student, Tim Boy (2023), articulates their challenges with receiving necessary accommodations in college, highlighting the schools misunderstanding of autism and autistic students' need of structured support systems and clear processes to ensure their needs are met:

Back when I was in college I had to actually go up to the teachers and give them my IEP. And the reason why I have to go up and give them my IEP s is because the school thinks that since I'm smart, I should advocate for myself and physically go out and give it to them. There was some classes that I nearly failed that because they didn't know that I had an IEP. So, teachers let your kids have their IEP s for their support. And if you need to accommodate them, accommodate them, don't make fun of them, help them. (Tim Boy, 2023)

Social challenges were also among the issues that students mentioned regarding their academic experience. One student, TheBlackgenderfluidhoe (2023), reflects the ongoing difficulties they face as a Black autistic college student. Despite being in college, they find the

experience challenging, particularly due to the social pressures. They said: “Uh like being now, being autistic and in college is still really hard, I'm not gonna lie. It's really pressuring all like the social shit and all everything else.” Another student considers their feelings of isolation during their college experience. Despite attending classes and being partnered with classmates, the speaker did not develop any enduring friendships throughout college. She said:

...But specifically, college where ADHD and autism came in, I would go to my classes, I had no friends my entire college experience, nobody stuck around. I'd be partnered up with people and people wanna be my partner because I look like I did my work, and they could copy some notes off me and some homework and copy what they did because I'm autistic. And I thought that they wanted to be my friends and so, but they never went anywhere. No one ever asked me to hang out. (Bbcutiee, 2023)

Chapter 4: Discussion

This study aimed to explore the educational experiences of Black autistic postsecondary students; a population often underrepresented in academic research. To begin, I conducted a content analysis of peer reviewed academic articles published to examine the extent of research pertaining to the educational experience of this population. Results of the analysis indicate that there is no current research pertaining to the postsecondary experience of Black autistic students published between 2013 and 2023, along with a general lack of rigour in the literature and research concerning Black autistic student experiences. In total, I found only 57 articles published from 2013 to 2023, that examine the general experience of being an autistic student in elementary and/or secondary school. These studies did include Black autistic students within their samples, but failed to center the Black autistic perspective, or analyse how intersectionality impacts their academic environment. Such findings suggest that Black autistic individuals must continue to be neglected in research, diagnosis, and clinical understanding. While scholarship in this area has increased over the past ten years, with 64% of the 57 articles published after 2018, more inclusive and intersectional research needs to be done to better understand this group.

Researchers should concentrate on applying theories like Critical Race Theory or DisCrit to the study of Black autistic students, emphasizing how the intersection of their various identities influence their educational experiences and employment outcomes. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that a significant majority of the articles were published by white neurotypical authors (45%), thus the true experiences of Black autistic students may have been unrepresented or overlooked, potentially leading to a lack of comprehensive understanding of their unique challenges and perspectives. This could explain why 71% of articles did not include any social justice themes, and why the most frequently discussed topic throughout the articles was parental supports, appear in 21% of papers, while the least frequently discussed topics were peer relationships (10.3%), academic difficulties (5.3%), emotional dysregulation (5.3%), and encounters with the justice system (3.5%).

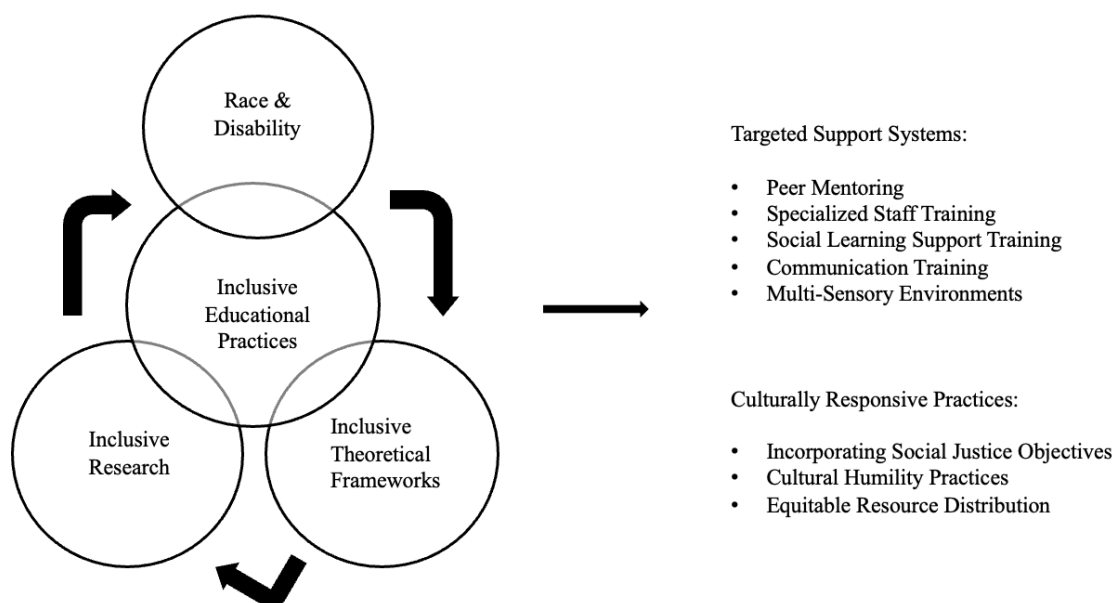
To address the dearth of research on this topic and population, I analyzed TikTok posts by Black autistic content creators discussing their academic journeys. This approach provided a unique perspective on their experiences, highlighting both challenges and individual successes. My analysis revealed several key challenges. First, Black autistic students face significant challenges related to both their racial and autistic identities. These challenges include masking, autistic burnout, educational and economic disparities, postsecondary challenges related to academic performance and social isolation. Second, despite these obstacles, many students showcased resilience and utilized various strategies to succeed academically. Third, the supportive role of online communities, particularly on TikTok, emerged as a crucial factor in providing validation and advice.

The findings also indicate that Black autistic students often navigate a complex interplay of racial and disabled discrimination in educational settings. The discrimination Black autistic

students encounter can be attributed to implicit biases and systemic inequities within educational institutions (Thompson & Pinnock, 2022). The resilience displayed by these students is a testament to their strength and adaptability, often relying on personal coping mechanisms and external support systems. The significance of TikTok as a platform for sharing experiences underscores the importance of community and representation for marginalized groups. These results align with existing literature on the challenges faced by autistic students in general, particularly regarding the need for better support and understanding (Roffey, 2013; Caplan, 2013). However, my research extends this knowledge by focusing on the intersectionality of race and autism, a combination that has received limited attention in previous research. The findings corroborate other studies that emphasize the importance of peer support and community in enhancing the well-being of autistic individuals.

Future Directions

Figure 3
Future Directions



Note. This diagram depicts how the acknowledgement of race and disability are important in developing inclusive research and educational practices; and allows for the development of targeted support systems and culturally responsive practices.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of intersectionality, racism, and ableism in education by highlighting how race and disability intersect to shape the experiences of Black autistic students. It supports the need for frameworks, such as intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and Disability and Critical Race Studies, which consider multiple identities and the compounded effects of discrimination and racism that impact the lives of those who exist at the intersection of race and disability. For educators and policy makers, these findings underscore the necessity of developing inclusive educational practices that recognize and address the unique needs of Black autistic students. As depicted in figure 3, this could include targeted support programs, diversity training for staff, social learning support training for students, and the creation of safe, inclusive spaces within schools, such as multi-sensory environments. Moreover, the introduction of culturally responsive practices to target understanding the unique needs of Black autistic students. This includes the incorporation of social justice objectives and cultural humility practices, such as better training policies and guidelines to equip educators, school personnel, and disability counsellors, on how to support their racially diverse students. The incorporation of such objectives can result in equitable resource distribution within academic institutions. Future research should continue to explore the experiences of Black autistic students across different educational levels and settings. Longitudinal qualitative studies could provide deeper insight into how these experiences evolve over time. Additionally, this study illuminates the educational experiences of Black autistic students, emphasizing their challenges and resilience. The supportive role of TikTok highlights the potential for social media as a tool for

community building and advocacy. These findings call for more inclusive educational practices and further research to better understand and support these racialized and disabled individuals.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. This study's reliance on available academic literature both poses limitations, but also reflects the broader limitations of this field of study. While a content analysis of peer-reviewed academic articles provides a comprehensive overview of the literature, it does not fully capture the lived academic experiences of Black autistic individuals. Therefore, the findings are likely to be influenced by the existing biases within the literature, which often reflect the perspectives and priorities of white neurotypical researchers. When researchers share similar backgrounds or experiences with the participants, it lessens the likelihood of reinforcing problematic hierarchies and further disenfranchising and harming communities under study (Sprague et al., 2019; Abrams et al., 2020). Additionally, the use of recruitment methods such as, flyers, social media, emails and mail/solicitation (66%), and clinical referrals (9.3%), contribute to the non-representative sample. Because most researchers lacked intersectional thinking, considerations during their studies conceptualization were not reflective of sociohistorical forces of marginalization, or an understanding of the participant identities (Abrams et al., 2020). Furthermore, the predominant use of survey questionnaires (63%) and secondary data (33%) further limits the depth of understanding of the nuanced experiences of Black autistic students in educational settings. If we consider intersectionality in developing thoughtful data collection methods to enhance quality of information, help reduce the risk of perpetuating social injustice and the reinforcement of structural stigma (Abrams et al., 2020). If intersectionality were considered, researchers might have selected methods, approaches, and data collection and analysis strategies that are more

sensitive to the participants' lived realities. Moreover, 53% of participants failed to specify their household income; or parent level of education (61%). Due to the relative dearth of information, lack of generalizable studies, and inadequate data collection and analyses from an intersectional perspective, these samples hinder my ability to draw concrete and accurate conclusions about the experiences of Black autistic students in academic institutions.

The use of TikTok as a data source may introduce selection bias, as it only captures the experiences of individuals who are active on this platform. This may exclude those who do not use TikTok or do not share their experiences publicly, skewing the data towards a certain demographic or type of experiences. Additionally, TikTok's algorithm, a uniquely appealing aspect of the platform, also tends to keep its users in a Black box. Its algorithmic curation is deeply dependent on the user's profile (e.g., IP address, sign-up information, mobile device information) and user's interactions (e.g., commenting on, liking or sharing videos), therefore impacting the content shown to me, and ultimately the content I analysed (Kanthawala et al., 2022). Because TikTok is a platform dependent on algorithmic curation, it is impossible to create a user profile that is meant to capture average content (Kanthawala et al., 2022). To address this, I used strategies recommended by (Kitchin, 2017; Snelson, 2016) such as targeting specific hashtags for data collection, however such strategies can only do so much as they are not always representative of the content I'm looking for. Moreover, English-language posts or hashtags are not representative of TikTok's international user base. TikTok is also not accessible in all parts of the world (e.g., TikTok is banned or heavily censored in countries such as Russia, Nepal, Pakistan, China, and India; Chan, 2024), further limiting generalizability (Kanthawala et al., 2022).

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#autistic #autisticadult #autistictiktok #autisticwomen #autisticcreator #adhd #adhdtiktok

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Academic Difficulties	Challenges or obstacles encountered by students in their educational pursuits, which may include struggles with learning, understanding, performance, or engagement in academic tasks or activities.
Anti-Black Racism	“A system of beliefs and practices that attack, erode, and limit the humanity of Black people” (Carruthers, 2016, p 26).
Behavior Challenges	Patterns of behavior that present difficulties or disruptions in an educational context.
bell hook’s Notion of Home Joy	hooks writing articulates homeplace as a site of resistance for Black people that offers a respite from oppression and helps facilitate their healing, affirm their intersecting identities, and experience wholeness (Hannon and Hannon, 2023).
Black autistic Perspective	Autism research done by autistic people.
Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Developmental Theory	This theory views development as influenced by process, characteristics of the person, contexts of micro, macro, meso and exosystem, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
Communication Challenges	Difficulties in effectively exchanging information, ideas, or concerns between parents, students, and staff within an educational setting.
Critical Race Theory	A theoretical framework that examines how race intersects with systems of power, privilege, and oppression.
Cultural Brokers	Etienne Wenger (1998) defines brokering as “connections provided by people who can introduce elements of one practice to another.” (p. 105). He further argues that multi-membership allows cultural brokers to compile information and act as agents for change using boundary objects which are, “artifacts, documents, terms, concepts, and other forms of reification around which communities of practice can organize their interconnections” (p 105).
Cultural Capital	Sociologists have defined a person’s social assets, such as their education, style of speech, and intellect, as cultural capital (Throsby, 1999).
Cultural Deficit Model	This model holds that minority group members are different from

	the majority group members because their culture is deficient in important ways from the dominant majority groups. This could be one aspect in explaining why African American males are more prevalent in special education categories in comparison to other ethnic minority groups (Kirk & Goon, 1975).
Cultural Model of Disability	A framework that conceptualizes disability as a product of social and environmental factors rather than solely as an individual impairment. Additionally, the cultural model of disability promotes the consideration of disability in the context of culture and how people with disability function in that culture (Twardowski, 2022).
Emotional Dysregulation	Difficulties in managing or controlling one's emotions in an expected manner within an educational setting.
Encounters with the Justice System	Encounters with law enforcement officers.
Lack of Specialized Trained Personnel	Specifically, as it relates to working with Black autistic students. Parents reported that school staff are unaware of how to navigate supporting autistic students, especially from a culturally relevant perspective.
Parental Advocacy	Advocating for the rights and needs of students to ensure they receive an appropriate and quality education.
Parental Support	This addresses the issue of inadequate parental support in accessing programs and resources aimed at aiding parents in supporting their children's development and well-being, such as information access and support groups.
Parent/Caregiver Perspective	Researchers examine the experiences of autism through the analysis of caregivers or parents of autistic students OR researchers examine the experience of being a caregiver or parent of an autistic child.
Peer Relationships	Social interactions and connections that individuals, typically of similar age or status, establish with one another.
Racism	Discrimination based on an individual's race or ethnicity.
Research Perspective	Researchers summarized the findings from their perspective. Usually, quantitative.
Siblings Perspective	Researchers examine the experience of having an autistic sibling.
Student Support Services	Resources provided by educational institutions to assist students in achieving their academic goals (ie: IEPs, EAs, etc). This refers to the receipt, dissatisfaction or its lack thereof.

Teacher Perspective	Researchers examine the experiences of teaching autistic students.
Intersectionality	Highlights how various aspects of identity intersect and interact with each other to shape individuals' experiences of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1995).

Appendix B: Demographic Information of TikTok Content Creators (Grey Literature)

Name	Race	Age	Gender & Pronouns	Geographic Location	Diagnosis & Comorbidities
EJ	Biracial	24	Nonbinary, They/Them	USA	Autism, ADHD, OCD
Datura Jonez	Black	28	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autism, ADHD
Kai	Black	24	Nonbinary, They/Them	USA	Autism, ADHD
Chris	Black	Unknown	She/Her	USA	Autism, ADHD
Cleopatra	Afro-Indigenous	Unknown	Nonbinary, They/The/Du/It	USA	Autism, BPD, Bipolar,
TheBlackgenderfluidhoe	Black	20	Nonbinary, They/Them	USA	Autistic, ADHD
Kenna	Biracial	25	Woman, She/Her	England	Autistic
Bbcutiee	Black	Unknown	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autistic, ADHD, Dyslexic
Minyarn	Black	22	Trans, They/Them	USA	Autistic
Brandeezy	Black	24	Man, He/Him	USA	Autistic
Autistic Pikachu	Coloured	28	Woman, She/Her	South Africa	Autistic, ADHD, BPD, OCD
Gab Tizzy	Black	Unknown	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autism, ADHD, OCD
Kayla Nicole	Black	25	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autistic
Jennifer	Black	Unknown	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autistic, ADHD

Camonghne Felix	Black	Unknown	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autistic, ADHD, Bipolar
Dr. Kofi	Black	Unknown	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autistic
DreeziusMaximus	Black	Unknown	Man, He/Him	USA	Autistic, ADHD
Jentok40	Black	Unknown	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autistic
Dee	Black	Unknown	Trans Man, He/Him	USA	Autistic, ADHD, OCD
Tim Boy	Black	Unknown	Man, He/Him	USA	Autistic
Nonbinarygremlin	Black	Unknown	Nonbinary, They/Them	USA	Autistic
Raven Derose	Black	22	Woman, She/Her	USA	Autistic, ADHD

Note. This information was obtained through the analysis of each content creators profile bio, videos uploaded, and interactions with other accounts on the platform. This demographic information was collected between March 2024 and June 2024.