Troubling the Master Narrative of "Grit": Counterstories of Black and Latinx Students with Dis/abilities During an Era of "High-Stakes" Testing

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Abstract: In this study we trouble the notion of "grit" and "high-stakes" testing by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities with the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Through interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations with 15 Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities, we utilize the power of student voice and counterstories to problematize the master narrative of a "grit"/no "grit" binary in education policy discourse. This binary has contributed to an educational culture that reinforces

victim blaming, reifies inequities for Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities, and undermines students' emotional wellbeing. Harnessing the power of the students' experiences and perspectives, we conclude with recommendations for policy and practice.

Keywords: high-stakes testing; grit, students of color with dis/abilities; urban schooling, Disability Studies in Education

Examinando la narrativa maestra de "grit": Las contra-narrativas con estudiantes negros y latinx con discapacidades durante una era de pruebas de "high-stakes"

Resumen: En este estudio, examinamos la noción de pruebas de "grit" y de "high-stakes" centrándonos en las experiencias y perspectivas de los estudiantes negros y latinx con discapacidades con el California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). A través de entrevistas, grupos focales y observaciones en el aula con 15 estudiantes negros y latinx con discapacidades, utilizamos el poder de las voces y las contra-narratives de los estudiantes para problematizar la narrativa magistral de un discurso binario "grit" / no "grit" dentro de política educativa. Este binario ha contribuido a una cultura educativa que refuerza el culpar a las víctimas, refuerza las inequidades para los estudiantes con discapacidades y socava el bienestar emocional de los estudiantes. Aprovechando el poder de las experiencias y perspectivas de los estudiantes, concluimos con recomendaciones para políticas y prácticas.

Palabras clave: pruebas de high-stakes; grit; estudiantes de color con discapacidades; escolarización urbana; estudios de discapacidad en educación

Examinando a narrativa-mestra do "grit": Contra-narrativas com alunos negros e latino-americanos com deficiências durante uma era de testes "high-stakes"

Resumo: Neste estudo, examinamos a noção de "grit" e "high-stakes" com foco nas experiências e perspectivas de alunos negros e latinos com deficiência, com o California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Por meio de entrevistas, grupos focais e observações em sala de aula com 15 alunos negros e latinos com deficiências, utilizamos o poder das vozes e contra-narrativas dos alunos para problematizar a narrativa-mestra de um discurso binário "grit" / "não grit" dentro da política educacional. Esse binário tem contribuído para uma cultura educacional que reforça a responsabilização das vítimas, reforça as desigualdades para os alunos com deficiência e prejudica o bem-estar emocional dos estudantes. Aproveitando o poder das experiências e perspectivas dos alunos, concluímos com recomendações de políticas e práticas.

Palavras-chave: testes de "high-stakes"; "grit", estudantes com deficiência; escolaridade urbana, estudos sobre deficiência na educação

Troubling the Master Narrative of "Grit": Counterstories of Black and Latinx Students with Dis/abilities During an Era of "High-Stakes" Testing

Over a decade has passed since the enactment of No Child Left Behind ([NCLB], 2001) and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA], 2004). One of the dominant assumptions embedded within these general and special education policies is that increased accountability and testing improve the opportunities and outcomes of *all* students, particularly for historically marginalized learners, including students labeled with dis/abilities.[1] Given wide criticism of NCLB as narrowly focused on "achievement gaps"[2] and the use of standardized tests as the primary driver to improve equity and outcomes, recent policy efforts have focused on more expansive indicators for learning (e.g., social and emotional learning and opportunity to learn) with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. However, it continues to be the case that the responsibility and consequences of achievement are placed primarily on students' individual educational performance on tests, including "high-stakes" tests. The logic being that the "high-stakes" nature of tests, such as passage on a high school exit exam to receive a diploma, serve as incentives for students to "work hard," "persevere," and demonstrate "grit." Indeed, the narrative of "grit"—the notion that with "perseverance" and "resilience" students can work hard to overcome adversity and achieve to meet higher academic standards and expectations (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007)—has emerged as a popular hegemonic narrative within general and special education policy and practice circles.

Yet, persistent inequities remain, including low expectations, segregation from the general education classroom and curriculum, and stigmatization, particularly for Black and Latinx[3] students labeled with dis/abilities (Artiles, 2011; Connor & Ferri, 2005; Erevelles, 2011). As argued by Annamma, Boelé, Moore, and Klingner (2013) these inequities are part of a larger ableist perspective whereby common-sense assumptions within the educational system become encapsulated within an ideology of the "normal" child with notions of "grit." Thus, the ideological underpinning of

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[1] By 'dis/abilities' or 'dis/ability' we do not connote a binary system, but rather underscore the social construction of both ability and disability as emotionally, socially, culturally historically, economically and politically constructed. Thus, we use the dash in "dis/ability" to disrupt how "disability" is constructed within special education as something to be identified, controlled, intervened and fixed (Taylor, Ferguson, & Ferguson, 1992), as opposed to understood and interpreted through the voices of those living with the disabilities and abilities. When we use the term 'disabilities' or 'disability' we distinguish it from the socially constructed or academic nature of 'dis/abilities' or 'dis/ability,' since they may represent impairing conditions associated with bureaucratic labels within systems such as those used in special education or in public education. From a Disability Studies in Education (DSE) approach 'disability' could also be seen as an identity marker to be proud of, as opposed to the stigmatizing ways U.S. culture has institutionalized it. From a DSE approach language matters and how we make sense of phenomena such as disability that disrupts deficit ideologies is important for how we can conceptualize students and people with disabilities as having not only impairments but also abilities. Given that DSE places the social construction of disability at its' center, within the study we also highlight that fact by using the dash in 'dis/ability' to convey to the reader that there is a spectrum of experiences with 'disability' as opposed to reinforcing a fixed notion of ability or disability as well given the individual experiences of ones intersectional experiences (Hernández-Saca, Kahn & Cannon, 2018).
[2] Like other educational constructs in this manuscript, such as "grit," and "hard work," we use quotations when we use "high-stakes," in order to problematize their validity and their non-contested nature through our use of rhetoric with quotation marks.
[3] We use the term Latinx to denote gender equality between Latinas and Latinos, as well as gender fluidity beyond binaries.

"standards" and "grit" pose significant educational challenges for students with dis/abilities (Tyack, 1974; Ware, 2004).

In this paper, we demonstrate the shortcomings of the "grit" narrative embedded within "high-stakes" testing and general and special education policies by centralizing the experiences and perspectives of Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities. We focus on the period between 2008-2009 when all students, including students with dis/abilities, were required to pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Specifically, we argue that "grit" is a master narrative, what Bamberg (2004) defines as "pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation [that] delineate and confine the local interpretation strategies and agency constellations in individual subjects as well as in social institutions" (p. 287). Although a great deal of research demonstrates the negative effects of "high-stakes" testing policies, a lack of research exist that centralize and examine the experiences and perspectives of students themselves, particularly Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities. Therefore, we examine how Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities experience standards-driven, "high-stakes" testing policies, particularly the notion that punishments and rewards lead students to "persevere" or "work hard" in school. We do this by asking the following research question: *How do educational policies and practices associated with "effort," "perseverance," and "grit" impact Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities as they attempt to pass "high-stakes" tests?*

In the section that follows, we provide a brief outline of contemporary education policies in both general and special education, discussing the historical growth of "high-stakes" tests and standardized testing and how laws have perpetuated master narratives and educational inequities along racial, economic, and sociopolitical lines over the last two decades. We highlight how these laws have kept historically marginalized learners from benefiting from policy efforts that have been purported to "help." We then discuss the emergence of "grit" and problematize the concept as it relates to general and special education as a way to sidestep the issues of access to resources, opportunities to learn, and overall inequity in education. The section ends with a discussion about the importance of including students' voices, experiences, and perspectives in education policy research.

Literature Review

With the passage of NCLB in 2001, increased policy pressure on students to perform on "high-stakes" tests was commonplace. Teaching to the test, the expansion of a scripted curricula (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Milner, 2013), problematic consequences for historically marginalized learners given the requirement that all "subgroups" reach 100% proficiency by 2014 (Artiles, 2011; Bejoian & Reid, 2005; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008), and cheating scandals (Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner & Rideau, 2010), make up just some of the negative effects of NCLB. Similar to a number of states across the country, California adopted high-school exit exams—the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)—that required *all* high school students beginning with the class of 2006 to pass the exam to receive a high school diploma.[4]

In response to these policy challenges, as well as the vast discontent and pressure felt by students, teachers, and leaders, NCLB was reauthorized in 2015 under ESSA. One of ESSA's most

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[4] This study was conducted during the 2008-2009 school year when it was mandatory that all students, including students with disabilities, pass the CAHSEE in order to receive a standard high school diploma. It should be noted that in October 2015, the current governor of California, Jerry Brown, signed a bill that allows students who meet all high school graduation requirements, but do not pass the CAHSEE, to receive a standard high school diploma.

popular aspects is an intentional move away from the sole dependency on standardized tests as the primary measure for achievement, with states now required to assess student growth, and encouraged to measure factors related to "grit" (Association of University Centers on Disabilities, 2015). ESSA, for example, encourages multiple measures for achievement (e.g., standardized testing, measures of student growth, portfolios, extended projects or performance tasks; National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d). Despite these policy moves to promote multiple and varied use of standardized tests to measure achievement, the inclusion of students with dis/abilities is a fairly recent aspect of U.S. general and special education policy. It is also the case that current special and general education policies do not acknowledge the intersectional experiences of students with dis/abilities (Artiles, 2013; Tefera, 2016; Hernández-Saca, Kahn, & Cannon, 2018), which creates significant gaps in purported efforts to address the civil rights of all students with dis/abilities.

The Master Narratives Embedded in Standards and "High-Stakes" Testing Policies

The historical roots of testing are troubling. Growing out of the Alfred Binet IQ test in France in 1904, the test was originally an attempt to assess young children with dis/abilities. The IQ test, however, was re-conceptualized in the United States and branded as an instrument to measure innate and "fixed" ability (Tyack, 1974). In effect, the test became a tool to reinforce racial and class hierarchies in the US (Au, 2013; Baynton, 2001; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006). Importantly, the IQ test laid the "groundwork to use standardized testing to justify the sorting and ranking of people by race, ethnicity, gender, and class according to supposedly inborn, biologically innate intelligence" (Au, 2013, p. 8).

Today's standardized tests are the product of education policies over the last four decades. One of the most significant reports commissioned during that time came out of the Reagan administration. The report, *A Nation at Risk* (1984), claimed, in part, that poverty, and what was described as "the underperformance of students in the US", would threaten the country's global competitive edge. This claim led to states moving in the direction of developing and adopting content standards, assessments to measure these standards, and standards around which factors (e.g., grade promotion, graduation, etc.) would be determined by scores on assessments. Thus, the start of the "high-stakes" testing era had begun.

The move to include students with dis/abilities as well as other learners, including Dual Language Learners (DLLs) in NCLB, was perceived to be an important step toward inclusion. Although measuring achievement of students with dis/abilities has long been a consideration in education policy (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000), it was not until 1997 that amendments were made to IDEA to focus on improving learning education outcomes for students with dis/abilities. For example, amendments were included that required students with dis/abilities have equal access to the general curriculum taught in schools within their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). It further designated that students with dis/abilities participate in testing to the best of their abilities.

Although some argue that the outlook for students with dis/abilities seems promising under ESSA (e.g., Council of Exceptional Children, 2015), a lack of research exists regarding the effects of these policies on Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities. This is particularly troubling given research that shows that less affluent students, and Black and Native American students are overrepresented in less rigorous programs, and fare worse in educational and disciplinary outcomes compared to their White peers (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Losen et al., 2014). Moreover, while legally required to be in the LRE, many Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities have little access to the general education curriculum, given segregated school contexts. Blanchett (2006), for instance, found that Black students spend 60% or more of their school day in segregated special education classrooms, thus experiencing structural segregation and racism.

We argue these inequities are a species of white supremacy and disablism structured within educational contexts, as opposed to individual and meritocratic explanations of "underachievement." According to Thomas (1999) disablism is "a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (p. 3). In addition, Thomas stated, the importance of considering the "personal or inter-subjectively felt' effects of social forces and processes which operate (not in direct, mechanical or unidimensional ways) in shaping the subjectivities of people with impairments" (p. 48). This reframing places the onus not on individual students with dis/abilities, but on educational systems and policies that ignore multiple forms of oppression.

In a similar response that troubles notions of equity in general and special education policy, scholars have critiqued "high-stakes" testing policies such as NCLB for stigmatizing historically marginalized learners (Wun, 2014). For instance, Ladson-Billings (2006) reframed the discourse of "underachievement" and "underperformance" as deficit oriented (Valencia, 2012), and called for a critical look at the structural factors that have been significant barriers for historically marginalized learners and their families (e.g., Connor, 2008; Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016). Through the construct of "educational debt," Ladson-Billings (2006) argued for a framework that includes a historical (e.g., history of exclusions), economic (e.g., funding disparities), sociopolitical (e.g., civic and political representation) and moral (e.g., what is owed to groups who have been excluded from social goods) contexts regarding so called "achievement gaps" of historically marginalized youth, in our case, Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities.

It is also important that we note that the practice of "high-stakes" exams have slowly declined over the past few years, partially due to cases in both federal and state court systems challenging how exit testing policies violate both due process and equal protection for students. Holme and Heilig (2012) highlight various court cases that placed restrictions on exit testing policies due to claims that they are unconstitutional given resource inequalities and inequitable opportunities to learn across schools. A few examples of these restrictions have been retesting opportunities, appeals for students who fail, and remediation funding.

Problematizing the Concept of "Grit" in Education

Since its evolution with the work of Duckworth et al. (2007), "grit" has become a buzzword within education to "support struggling students" and further "support high achievers." "Grit" has been defined as continued perseverance and passion for long-term goals, and consists of notions of persevering in the face of adversity or failure (Duckworth et al., 2007). According to the research, "grit" is associated with achievement, and claims "gritty children work harder and longer than their less gritty peers and, as a consequence, perform better" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1098). The assumption is that by teaching a student to be more "gritty," an educator will ensure that their student can persevere in the face of adversity and exude effort to increase their academic achievement.

There are, however, a number of assumptions and issues that arise in response to this "grit" master narrative. First, the focus on "grit" is intrinsically based on the problematic logic that Black and Latinx students and other historically marginalized learners are in need of "'discipline,' 'culture,' or [the] intrinsic traits [or skills] necessary for academic and life success" (Golden, 2017, p. 347). This assumption can lead one to perceive students as empty vessels to be filled and engenders a particular belief that students are in need of "saving" or "fixing." Further, it situates the problem within the minds and bodies of students as opposed to expanding the foci of analysis beyond individuals. In other words, the educational gaze is on the student as opposed to a more holistic

approach that considers the multiplicity of factors that maintain power, privilege, and oppression against Black and Brown students labeled with dis/abilities.

Furthermore, the "grit" master narrative fails to account for the contextual factors and availability of opportunity that influence students' educational outcomes (Anderson et al., 2016; Gorski, 2016; Headden & McCay, 2015; Heilig, Marachi, & Cruz, 2016; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Stokas, 2015). For example, there is concern that the master narrative of "low performance" can be attributed to an individual's lack of "grit" as opposed to considering the effects of the learning environment and the often inadequate supports provided to historically marginalized learners (Stokas, 2015). By enabling this justification, the "grit" master narrative unjustifiably holds historically marginalized learners responsible for larger structural and contextual inequalities (Anderson et al., 2016), even blaming students for "shortcomings that are more appropriately the responsibility of schools and society" (Headden & McCay, 2015, p. 14). In the failure to address the contextual inequity within the education system, the "grit" master narrative evades the causes of disparities (Gorski, 2016) and ignores "the chronic failures of test-based accountability" (Heilig et al., 2016, p. 149) instead of encouraging the necessary changes to eradicate education inequities.

Moreover, the notion of "grit" is problematic given the underlying deficit assumptions embedded in the construct and its relationship to dis/ability. Social constructions of ability and disability are situated within the mind, psyche, and body of students with dis/abilities. However, we argue that dis/ability is not a deficit, but is an identity category to take pride in, as are other identity categories (Linton, 1998). The Society of Disability Studies, Critical Disability Studies, and Disability Studies in Education communities all foreground a version of the social model of disability that moves beyond understanding "disability" from a medical-psychological model and as a deficit, to one that approaches "disability" as a social construction, where society either enables or disables those with impairments and in turn has psycho-emotional effects on their well-being (Shakespeare, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Thomas, 1999). In addition, from the perspective of these scholarly communities, disability is akin to other identity markers to garner resources and political recognition (Longmore, 2003). For example, the Disability Rights Movement, which began in the late 19th century, included activists who used a minority-model frame to galvanize a disability critical consciousness for civil rights of Americans with disabilities. This activism led to federal policies such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, among others (Longmore, 2003; Shapiro, 1994).

Furthermore, we critically analyze the notion of "grit" in policy as part and parcel of how "goodness" or "smartness" (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011) is framed within an ideology of normalcy. To have or to not have "grit" works in a binary logic that fails to address the complexity of everyday life and the cultural nature of learning (Rogoff, 2003). Therefore, the centering of "grit" as the solution is deeply problematic since it sustains the ideology of individualism and meritocracy that current U.S. society and schooling inculcates students with (Rogoff, 2003).

Some scholars have urged the education community to consider "grit" in terms of both individual and structural factors that affect student learning (Anderson et al., 2016). For example, Socol (2014) emphasized the importance of offering options within schools (e.g. learning environments, learning styles) that allow students to work within their differences as opposed to imposing the dominant culture's notion of "grit" that strips and disregards individual difference and fails to consider how structural factors affect student opportunities to learn. One way to understand the educational contexts of students, particularly historically marginalized youth with dis/abilities, is to listen to and learn from their experiences and perspectives about their educational experiences. In the section that follows, we focus on the critical nature of student voice in policy.

The Importance of Student Voice in Educational Policy Research

The "grit" master narrative of a "high-stakes" testing culture and the history of unequal treatment has created extreme pressure on historically marginalized learners in today's schooling contexts. Despite the known benefits of incorporating student voice in general and special educational decisions (Connor, Ebby-Rosin, & Brown, 2015; Mitra, 2009), there is a dearth of research that includes the voices and perspectives of historically marginalized youth labeled with dis/abilities (Hernández-Saca, 2016; Heilig et al., 2016). This is particularly true if we aim to understand how students who have been historically marginalized are affected by recent general and special education policy decisions. It also continues to be the case that education stakeholders, including teachers and administrators, believe that students' stories and experiences are inadequately considered in schools (Connor et al., 2015). However, in a review of student voice research from 1990-2010, Gonzalez, Hernández-Saca, and Artiles (2016) suggested that this kind of research is building momentum, and described the importance of centering the stories of marginalized students labeled with dis/abilities. While the incorporation of student voice in research is growing and opening up new conversations in education policy and practice, the stories of particular marginalized groups, including Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities, are largely lacking from this scholarship. It is imperative that scholars consider whose stories are valued, as well as critically reflect on whose stories are excluded (Connor et al., 2015). As described by Nasir and Hand (2006):

> Broadening awareness within the field of educational research about *whose* stories are being heard (and whose are not) and how these stories are embedded in a system of power that treats dominant structures and practices as normative can help make race and racialized [and other minoritized] experiences explicit in educational contexts (p. 455).

In an effort to broaden awareness within educational research and to include the perspectives of those students that have been largely absent, our work seeks to focus on the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities within a "high-stakes" testing policy context. We are particularly interested in focusing on the voices of Black and Latinx with dis/abilities through counter-storytelling and counterstories: "[A] method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told. The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial [and other forms of] privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Aligned with Baglieri, Valle, Connor, and Gallagher (2011), we believe that centralizing the voice and experience of Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities "affords those who do not hold power in society to achieve more equality, more inclusion, and ultimately more of the dignity they deserve" (p. 273). In the section that follows, we outline our theoretical framework of Critical Policy Sociology and Disability Studies in Education, which we use to centralize student voice in our work.

Critical Policy Sociology & Disability Studies in Education

Critical Policy Sociology

In this study, we utilize Critical Policy Sociology ([CPS]; Ball, 1997; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Ozga, 1987) to uncover and understand the gap between the intention of "high-stakes" general and special education policies and their actual effect. Specifically, a CPS perspective

> . . . resists the tendency of policy science to abstract problems from their relational settings by insisting that the problem can only be understood in the complexity of

those relations. In particular, it represents a view that a social-historical approach to research can illuminate the cultural and ideological struggles in which schooling is located (Grace, quoted in Ball, 1997, p. 264).

This policy-as-practice perspective is critical to our analysis of how the policy of "high-stakes" testing was experienced by Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities within their specific contexts. In addition, similar to Castagno and McCarty (2017), we approach policy from a dynamic perspective that is always in motion. That is, one that is critical of the historical and current conditions that "isms" have created within current general and special educational contexts and thus broaden notions of policy beyond "colorless" or "powerless."

Thus, a CPS perspective intentially moves away from a purely technical approach to the analysis of policy to considering policy from a social justice lens (Dumas, Dixson, & Mayorga, 2016). Using this approach opens up opportunities to consider the "political, social and economic arrangements where persons are never treated as a means to an end, but treated as ends in their own right" (Prunty, 1985, p. 136). This perspective allows us to focus on the interplay between the mandates of policy and their actual effects in practice, and the ways students respond to, make "meaning-feeling" (Lemke, 2013) of, and are affected by "high-stakes" tests, particularly within the contexts in which students are situated. This is an important lens, as it affords the opportunity to document how policies are absorbed into school structures and experienced by multiple stakeholders, including students.

Disability Studies in Education

Similar to a Critical Policy Sociology (CPS) perspective that takes into account the historical, cultural, political, social, and economic dimensions of education, so does a Disability Studies in Education framework. While CPS provides a policy framework for investigating the CASHEE exam's affect on Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities beyond the technical dimensions, DSE helps us focus on how the social construction of disability, ability, race and normalcy are at work within educational policies. In particular, a DSE standpoint privileges the social model of disability, which situates disability within the social, political, and economic environment, over the medical-psychological model, which situates disability within the brain, neurology and the body of the individual. Nevertheless, some DSE scholars aim to transcend a pure focus on the social model to understand the phenomenology of disability by emphasizing the importance of both social forces and their effects on the social identity, agency and emotional well-being of people with dis/abilities (See Hernández-Saca & Cannon, 2016, for an overview of disability as psycho-emotional disablism). Similarly, we approach dis/ability as psycho-emotional disablism, that is, disability oppression is due to both the manifestation of discrimination and violence at the individual and structural levels of schooling and society. Social discrimination and violence not only affects the psycho-emotional well-being of people with disabilities, but also are forms "of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments" (Thomas, 1999, p. 3).

Furthermore, a DSE perspective leads us to argue that the master narrative of "grit" is highly problematic since it attributes ability and disability to individual students, while not taking into account the multiple contexts in which they live. Thus, a DSE perspective complements CPS by situating the study of "high-stakes" testing and "grit" beyond the medical-psychological processes of individual students, and instead expands the analysis to consider the multiple dimensions students embody, including an explicit focus on race and dis/ability. Thus, DSE allows us to problematize the current neoliberal discourse on "competition," "individualism" (Mitchell, Snyder, & Ware, 2014), and the mythology of "grit" as a reductionist solution for Black and Latinx students with

dis/abilities, with the focus on "lack of performance" and "perseverance." Further, this policy "remedy" ignores history, culture, and power relations through its focus on achievement and on the individual rather than the cultural, historical, and structural dimensions.

Setting the Context

In 2007, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger declared education to be a priority of his administration, and he pushed a series of general and special education initiatives, including the requirement that students in special education pass the CAHSEE in order to receive a high school diploma. Echoing this call, then California Secretary of Education, Jack O'Connell stated that including students in special education in the CAHSEE was critical to ensuring students learn the basic skills necessary to contribute to the economic success of the state (Sanchez, 2007). Similarly, then U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings spoke of the necessity of such policies to close the "achievement gap" and prepare students to succeed in the global economy.

Like many urban schools in California at the time, Morning Sun High School (MSHS, pseudonym) was a school that struggled to meet accountability mandates embedded within NCLB, including Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), as well as California's Annual Performance Index (API). MSHS was consistently designated in "need of improvement," and never received an API score above a one (one being the lowest on a scale of one to ten). The school also struggled with inadequate resources, and a steady decline in per-pupil expenditures, particularly during the three decades prior to the CAHSEE mandate, which contributed to the dwindling resources and a deteriorating school infrastructure that were needed to appropriately prepare students for academic requirements and policy mandates (Policy Analysis for California Education, 2008). These challenges contributed to structural and material inadequacies, including lack of quality teachers, reliance on substitute teachers, and lack of access to essential course curricula, all of which heavily shaped students' experiences and outcomes on the CAHSEE (Tefera, in press). Though the call for closing the "achievement gap" permeated state and federal policy discourse, local contexts—e.g., historical, social, economic—were clearly not considered in these policies. Thus, the focus on test score gaps to address educational inequalities placed the onus of passing "high-stakes" tests on individual students rather than systems of inequality that heavily shaped students' experiences and outcomes (Tefera, in press). These contextual data situate the findings of this study in an important light.

Methods

Study Site and Participants

The first author conducted this study at Morning Sun High School (MSHS), a Title I school located in southern California. MSHS served approximately 2,000 students, with approximately 50% Latinx students and 49% Black students. Sixty-two percent of students qualified for free or reduced-priced meals. Of the nearly 2,000 students in MSHS, 159 qualified to receive special education services. Of the 159 students in special education, 137 were labeled with a learning disability (LD), while the remaining 22 students were labeled with emotional behavioral disorders, intellectual disabilities, other health impairments, or autism.

The majority of students in special education at MSHS were in the Resource Specialist Program (RSP), where students spent less than 50% of their school day in special education classrooms. RSP classrooms provided instructional supports to students with disabilities who were assigned to a general education classroom for the majority of the school day. Alternatively, Special Day Classes (SDC) were made up of students who spent the majority of their school day, more than

50% of their time, in special education classrooms. SDC classrooms were intended to provide more intense instructional supports for students whose needs were determined to be difficult to meet in the general education classroom. The CAHSEE was required of students in both RSP and SDC classrooms, unless it was determined that a student qualified to take the California Alternative Performance Assessment (CAPA). Students who qualified for the CAPA were those who had the most "significant" dis/abilities. None of the students in this study, however, qualified to take CAPA.

To capture the experiences of Black and Latinx students who spent the majority of their time in special education classrooms, students in SDC were the focus of this study. Given that seniors were most likely to have the most experience with the exam, only 12th-grade students in SDC classrooms were asked to participate in the study. Students that met the criteria for the study received recruitment flyers and details about the study. All students who qualified were invited to participate in the study. Twenty students met the criteria of the study, and 15 agreed to participate (see Appendix A). The participants included eight Black males (2 EBD/LD, 2 EBD, 1 LD, 3 mild ID), four Black females (1 EBD, 3 LD), two Latinas (1 EBD, 1 LD), and one Latino (1 EBD/LD). In addition, informal conversations with special and general educators and school administrators also occurred occasionally that focused on details regarding students' specific learning needs, how these compared to the observations and experiences of students in general education in the school, and their experiences administering and facilitating the CAHSEE. While teachers and administrators were not the focus of this study, their perspectives provided key insight about the school context and how "high-stakes" testing policies were implemented in MSHS.

Data Collection Procedures

The study began with the first author conducting a total of four focus group interviews with the 15 students. Each focus group consisted of three to five students and lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The focus group interviews focused on students' experiences with the CAHSEE, opportunities to learn, and experiences in special education, particularly within an under-resourced urban high school context (see Appendix B). Interview and observation instruments were modeled after previous studies on equity in special education and policy (Artiles et al., 2011; Harry & Klingner; 2016). To ensure the reliability or trustworthiness, protocols, were shared with experts in the fields of education policy, special education, and urban schooling for feedback. As noted by Castillo-Montoya (2016) and Patton (2015), feedback from experts in the field is important in providing information about how well participants understand the questions and whether the questions capture what is intended, which ultimately help to ensure research questions are answered. Protocols were used consistently across interviewees. Trustworthiness was used to indicate credibility, transferability confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1989).

Once focus group interviews were completed, all participants were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. Eight students (*n* = 8) agreed to participate in individual interviews. The first author conducted individual semi-structured interviews with students who agreed to participate, each lasting 45–60 minutes. Individual interviews focused on themes that emerged during focus group interviews, and probed for additional details about emerging themes (see Appendix C). Conducting individual interviews resulted in more details about the opportunities and challenges that emerged for students with the CAHSEE, particularly regarding their emotional responses and experiences with the exam.

In addition to focus group and individual interviews, the first author conducted 36 classroom observations. Observations focused on the classroom curriculum, emotional climate of the classroom, and the organizational structure of the classroom (see Appendix D). Weekly observations took place during the students' English and Math CAHSEE preparation courses. The

purpose of the observations was to examine and document how the students were being prepared for the exam, their engagement with the material as they prepared for the CAHSEE, as well as classroom discourse between students, and between students and teachers. Math CAHSEE preparation courses included only students in special education, while CAHSEE English preparation courses took place in an inclusive classroom setting with both special and general education students.

Analysis Procedures

Using tools from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the data analysis process was iterative in nature, and included a constant comparative method. During this process the first author consulted the literature and constantly read through individual, focus group, and observational data as they were being collected to examine emerging themes and identify key patterns. Writing memos after data collection was also a key part of the analysis process. Utilizing a constant comparative method, key similarities and differences in students' experiences were captured. Specifically, the coding process began with open coding where an initial set of descriptive codes was identified. The data were then coded again by looking for key patterns in the data and among the initial open codes. This phase of coding focused on examining the relationships between codes in order to identify core concepts in the data. After core concepts were identified, themes from the data emerged and were captured. The most salient themes that helped answer the study's research questions were then identified, resulting in key findings for the study.

Findings

The findings from this study demonstrate the clear commitment, perseverance, and resilience of students given their desire to receive a high school diploma, graduate, and meet the expectations of families and friends. Despite students' perseverance, or so-called "grit," however, students discussed the constant struggles they experienced while meeting the demands of the "high-stakes" testing policy. Indeed, the students' narratives challenge the normative assumption in policy that equity can be measured with all students meeting the same standards, including passage on "high-stakes" exams. We outline these findings in the subsequent sections by first providing students' counter-narratives, which challenge narrow assumptions embedded within "high-stakes" testing policies and the logic of "grit" by demonstrating students' perseverance and diligence as they attempted to meet testing mandates. We then show the shortcomings embedded within policy norms that fail to consider how and why individual learning needs and differences of students with dis/abilities are often overlooked in accountability policies. In particular, we detail the forms of psycho-emotional dis/ablism students experienced as a result of "high-stakes" testing pressures. The findings end with students explaining how policies that were intended to remedy inequities were actually reified in practice.

The Complexities of "Grit": Why It Isn't Always Enough

First, it is important that we demonstrate that despite what many might expect given research that shows increased likelihood of students dropping out (or being pushed out) due to challenges related to "high-stakes" exams, the vast majority of the students in the study demonstrated a strong desire to pass the CAHSEE, particularly given their commitment to receive a high school diploma. While some students thought about dropping out, ultimately none of the students who participated in this study did. Instead they spoke at length about the effort and care that they and many of their classmates put forth. Although it was clear that many students experienced extreme disappointment upon receiving news if they did not pass the CAHSEE (See

Appendix A for information about students' passage on the exam), their desire to pass the exam rarely wavered. For example, while Kassandra,[5] one of the participants, did not initially pass the exam, in an effort to prepare she said, "I was taking notes and like once a day I would read over the notes and try to memorize everything so I could do better." Like Kassandra, for many of the students the CAHSEE operated as a sort of motivator, which included focused individualized studying. At the same time, it is important to note that students were acutely aware that their performance on the exam was not simply a result of "hard work" but also their schooling context, given their opportunities to learn, which also shaped their outcomes and opportunities in meeting testing mandates (Tefera, in press).

Another student, Drake, described the ways he committed his time after school to preparing for the exam. He explained that while his strength was in math, he faced greater challenges passing the English portion of the exam. Despite a lack of interest in reading, Drake said that he forced himself to read on his own to prepare:

> Well, usually I hate reading, and like nobody could ever get me to read a book, but it was like I had to crack down and do what I had to do to pass [the CAHSEE]. So my teachers were surprised when they saw me pick up a book and start reading and doing everything I was supposed to do. That's one of the things that I had to do to pass it, so once I got the reading down, it was like nothing could stop me from passing it.

For Drake, one of the consequences of the CAHSEE was spending more time reading and getting books that interested him as a form of preparation to pass the exam. In addition to these efforts, Drake said he went to his teachers after school with questions, and he would also seek out extra help during class.

Similarly, another student, Esperanza, talked about studying and preparing, especially for the English portion of the exam, which she found more challenging. Even though she felt more confident in math, she described how she would spend more time reviewing the English concepts she learned in class at home. Esperanza explained, "Because I had more trouble with word analysis and reading comprehension, I reviewed practice problems every day until I got it, and then I would move on to the next thing to study, so that really helped me pass." Similarly, another student, Edna, explained:

> Since I had to pass the CAHSEE to graduate, I had to keep up with all my regular classes and I had to prepare for the test because I cared about it, and so I studied a lot. If you don't study and you don't care, I don't think you'll pass.

It is important to note that although Edna described her belief that studying and working hard would lead to passage, this was not always true for students, something she discussed later by clarifying, "Basically, yeah, some students they do study, [and] pass, but sometimes students do study for the CAHSEE, but they still don't pass." Indeed, for many students in the study they described working hard, but falling short of passing the exam. One student, Jorge, followed up by saying that he thought it was a matter of luck, "Students are studying, working hard, taking classes like outside the school and trying to learn more, but sometimes they just don't pass, and they start getting mad and feel like quitting, and they start crying, and it's just like hard." The students recognized that their individual effort was not always enough to pass given the many structural and material barriers and challenges they faced at MSHS.

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[5] Names of all participants are pseudonyms.

Likewise, students like Edna, Esperanza, and Jorge recognized that even with studying and individual effort many students were unable to pass. Given observations of students that demonstrated high levels of frustration, as well as research documenting drop-out/push-out rates increasing due to the pressure of "high-stakes" exams, one conversation during the focus group included a discussion on whether students felt like dropping out. Specifically, author 1 probed the students about whether they ever felt like dropping out due to the challenges they described with the CAHSEE:

> **Jorge**: Yeah. Well, I did want to drop out at first. Then my mom told me like, "No. Don't do it. Just go on until you pass it. At least try to pass it." And, you know, "Don't give up on it."
> **Esperanza**: I did feel like dropping out.
> **Edna**: Yeah, me too.
> **Esperanza**: Like the last time we took it junior year, I got the results, and I didn't pass, so I was like, "Mom, I'm not going back senior year. There's no point to it." But she like pushed me. She's like, "No. You have to try. You have to try again." And then the first time I took it (senior year) I was like, "Yeah, I passed."

In this conversation, while some students struggled with feelings of inadequacy and wanted to give up, their commitment to pass, along with encouragement from family and friends, were key factors in students' choosing to not give up or drop out.

It is important to note, however, that this was not the case for all students in the study. Unlike the purported claims that students would pass the CAHSEE with increased motivation to work hard in an effort to pass the CAHSEE and receive a high school diploma, for many of these students despite their "hard work" and "perseverance" they found meeting "high-stakes" testing mandates to be out of reach. Indeed, students in the study demonstrate how some students were in fact still "left behind" by the very policy that claimed to do the opposite. We discuss this paradox in the next section.

The harm of tests that erase difference and ignore the needs of individual learners. While some students embraced the challenge of the CAHSEE requirement and demonstrated a strong desire to pass the exam, it is important to note this was not the case for all students. While many students perceived the CAHSEE as a positive motivator and challenge, these were often students with less significant dis/abilities (e.g., specific learning disabilities as opposed to mild intellectual disabilities) who required fewer educational accommodations and one-on-one attention. For example, Phillip, a student with a mild intellectual disability, viewed the CAHSEE as a challenge that he wanted to face and overcome, but ultimately did not feel he could meet the challenge of passing the exam. He explained:

> . . . You're testing your abilities [with the CAHSEE], and you keep on trying and trying and trying, and that's what life's all about. Life is going to throw you challenges. It's going to really, really bug you and sometimes you just go like, 'Ahhh, I'm going to lose it.' That's what most people do, but you've got to get help . . . It's just a challenge. You've got to keep on trying and keep on moving, keep on doing what you need to do.

Despite Phillip's commitment to "keep on trying", he did not ultimately pass the CAHSEE. Yet he viewed the CAHSEE as a challenge—one he said was just an example of the many challenges he would have to deal with in life. Phillip exemplified those students who exerted the effort policymakers were hoping for, but due to a number of factors, including his individual learning

needs, still faced the negative consequences of not passing the exam and thus did not receive a high school diploma at the end of his senior year.

Repeatedly, we found that for students classified with mild intellectual disabilities, the CAHSEE proved to be a significant challenge despite the fact that they took the same preparation courses and often "worked hard" to prepare for the exam. During one conversation with the CAHSEE Math teacher, he spoke of the particular challenge students with mild intellectual disabilities faced. He was specifically concerned with the misalignment of the CAHSEE with students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)[6]. He explained, "To be forced to sit at a desk for several hours at a time answering hundreds of questions is a clear violation of many students' IEPs." Exemplifying this challenge, Matthew, a student labeled with a mild intellectual disability demonstrated the extreme levels of stress he often felt due to the requirement to pass the exam for graduation. When asked specific questions about the CAHSEE during our interview, his head would visibly lower, and his words would become softer, more difficult to decipher. On the other hand, when the topic changed to subjects he had a passion for, including art, his head would rise, his eyes would meet mine (first author) and he demonstrated greater willingness to engage in a conversation. For Phillip and Matthew, students who had more significant learning needs compared to many of their peers, the repressive nature of the CAHSEE cannot be overstated. Rather than increasing effort in school, the exam led to the opposite effect with students feeling overwhelmed and often demoralized.

For many of the students in this study the "high-stakes" nature of the exam positioned them to believe that "hard work" or "grit" would propel them to pass. At the same time, students were acutely aware of how attending an under-resourced school made meeting this expectation a significant challenge (Tefera, in press). These competing interests—prescribing to notions of "hard work" while also facing significant inequities within their school (e.g., unqualified teachers, excessive substitute teachers, and inadequate curricula)—complicated students' responses to the exam, which were also made evident in the mixed emotions the students described. Importantly, we found that the "high-stakes" nature embedded within the policy reduced students' complex social, emotional and structural worlds to a focus on mere "effort" and "grit," which paradoxically disadvantaged the very students the policy was purported to benefit.

The Negative Impact of "High-Stakes" Testing on the Well-Being of Black and Latinx Students with Dis/abilities

Intertwined with student effort and a strong desire to pass were how students' positionality at the intersection of multiple marginalized groups—Black and Latinx students and students with dis/abilities—mediated their experiences with the exam. Despite the purported aims of embracing difference and diversity in accountability and "high-stakes" testing policies, distinctions among students based on ability, individuality, and diversity continue to be undervalued in policy (Bejoian & Reid, 2005). Though the students did not speak explicitly about the effects of being required to take the exam given their specific disability label, many students did describe how aspects of their disabilities (e.g., lack of focus and attention) often served as barriers to passing the exam. From a DSE approach that foregrounds a psycho-emotional disablism perspective, we see how notions of "lack of focus" and "attention" and the emotions the come with such experiences did not come from students per se, but from the policy prescriptions about how one must show what one knows through "high-stakes" tests.

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[6] Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are both a document and the process that should drive "what is appropriate for students with disabilities" who are eligible for special education services (John, 2016, p. 43).

Challenging the medical-psychological paradigm embedded in "high-stakes" testing. We want to be clear that while some might situate the students' experiences within their neurology or biology, we argue it is important to understand how histories of oppression for marginalized learners, particularly those at the intersections of marginalization, have created a dangerous schooling environment that focuses on students "pulling themselves up by their boot straps" and exhibiting "grit." Importantly, we are not conflating students' negative and distracting thoughts as inherently part of students' "make-up" or their disabilities per se. Rather, we argue that flawed policies and practices—the culture of testing, standards and traditional schooling—within complex social and cultural contexts shaped students' responses, feelings, and experiences. That is, it is important to focus on the structural, political, social, cultural, *and* emotional meanings that position Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities within a double-bind of social constructions of race and dis/ability that inhibit students' learning opportunities (Artiles, 2013).

With this in mind, we found that in an effort to meet the challenges of the exam, many students began by answering the questions they could easily respond to, but then resorted to guessing on a number of questions they were stymied by. One of the students, Jason, for example, described this as a major frustration: "It's just that the problems are difficult for me," he explained. He went on to share that while he learned some of what was tested on the CAHSEE, he often faced challenges remembering how to answer the questions appropriately. This, he explained, would lead to feeling overwhelmed, which led to a lack of focus. Importantly, many of the students discussed, and the observations bore their discussions to be true, that much of what was tested on the CAHSEE was not taught in their classes, which only added to their anxieties. Elaborating on this point, Jason said, "I get paranoid and I freeze when I see the problems . . . it's just that my body gets super slow and like my whole body freezes." When asked how he responds to this stress, he answered, "I just try to relax, take a deep breath, and work my hardest."

From a DSE perspective, and in particular a dis/ability as psycho-emotional disablism perspective, embedded in students' narratives and responses was not only a sophisticated sense of self as learners as it relates to the exam and the structural barriers (external factors), but also how these external factors played a role in their inner world. The latter we understand as the social construction of the emotions of "high-stakes" testing" at the intersection of students' multiple identity categories that reproduces the status quo if framed from a non-critical lens. Considering psycho-emotional disablism that students experience provides an opportunity to examine this since it takes into account the social model of dis/ability and acknowledges the emotional and psychological aspects that people with dis/abilities experience. During a conversation with Drake, he also described many emotional challenges related to the exam, and how this was a consequence of having a dis/ability. He explained:

> Sometimes our [students with dis/abilities] confidence is real low when we get in
> there [the classroom to take the CAHSEE] because everybody's like, "I'm scared" or
> "This is going happen" or "That's going happen." Like all these voices in your head
> as soon as you start taking it, so it's like, "What's this answer?" But you can't really
> think because it's like, "I think I'm going to fail."

According to Drake, negative and distracting thoughts of failure, given the dis/ability label, made it difficult for him and other students with dis/abilities to focus on the exam. In this example, we also see that Drake experienced a form of psycho-emotional disablism, given the social stigma and the emotional impact the label had on him, something that people with dis/abilities often experience, which further constrains students' activities in schools (Thomas, 1999, Hernández-Saca & Cannon, 2016).

Policies that hurt: How policies reify rather than remedy inequities. For many students with dis/abilities, due to IDEA, there is the option to stay in school until the age of 21 even if the students did not pass the CAHSEE by their senior year. Yet despite this option, and students describing the stress of not passing the CAHSEE, few students viewed staying in school after the typical four years of high school as a viable option. In part, this was due to the stigmatization they felt given their dis/ability label. For example, students would often enter their classroom through a side door, rather than the front door, because, as many students described, they did not want to be seen walking into the classroom that had been identified for students in special education. Hernández-Saca and his colleagues (2018) have recently described such negative identification processes of special education as *special education symbolism* that students labeled with dis/abilities are often forced to navigate to "save face." In essence, going through the alternative door provided the students with what they perceived as protective anonymity. In many ways students who could have benefited from the laws and policies dictated within IDEA often did not in an attempt to avoid stigmatization. This is not surprising given that there is a long history of marginalized youth, including Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities, resistant to being associated with special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Jones, 1972). This was exemplified during a long discussion with participants Joy, Brandon, and Jason on the option of staying in school until 21 to receive a diploma:

> **Author 1**: The law states that if you're in special ed. you can stay at Morning Sun High until you're 21. Would you all do that?
> **All students**: Nooo!
>
> **Author 1**: Why not?
> **Jason**: One reason…
> **Joy**: Because I don't want to be grown in high school. That would look weird, because if you're 21 and then graduate and then you go to college that isn't going to look right.
> **Jason**: For one…it's hard enough…I know a student that's 19 and is graduating this year, but you're supposed to graduate with your class and your friends, you know what I mean. And then if you don't pass [the CAHSEE]… you're going to be looking stupid because you haven't passed the test and you have to go to night school and you know people around you…
> **Joy**: And they're going to know your age, and they're going to talk about you.
> **Jason**: They're going to know your age and talk about you…and 'Oh, it's because you're special,' like, 'he didn't pass the test because he's retarded.'

To understand whether it was common for students to be called derogatory terms due to their disability, especially related to the policy related to students with disabilities having the opportunity to stay in school until 21, author 1 probed for clarification, and asked:

> **Author 1**: Do a lot of people make fun of students who stay because they can stay until they're 21 if they have different needs?
> **Joy**: A lot of people talk about people…
> **Jason**: In general . . . like for example if you walk around on campus or whatever, and I think you're in special ed., nobody will know that until they see you in the classroom, and then once they see you in that class, rumors start to spread.
>
> **Author 1**: Does that impact you and how hard you try or…

Jason: It does.
Author 1: Does it make you try harder, or does it make you try less hard?
Jason: It makes me try harder.
Joy: Like, you could go to the community college and finish the CAHSEE there if you wanted to. You don't have to stay here.

Author 1: Is that something you would think about doing? Would you continue, Brandon, after Morning Sun?
Brandon: Yeah.

Author 1: To try to pass [the CAHSEE]?
Brandon: Yeah.

Author 1: How about you Jason?
Jason: Yeah. I would do it because I want to pass; you know what I'm saying?

Author 1: So you would be open to staying?
Jason: Yeah, but in a way I would regret doing it because people…
Brandon: People talk about you…
Jason: People are going to talk about me; it's going to be basically going through hell.
Joy: Because the main thing they're going to be saying, 'Weren't you supposed to graduate last year? You're not even supposed to be here.'
Jason: Exactly.

The issue of staying in school until the age of 21 was significant for many of the students. They shared that they would not be likely to take advantage of the option even if it meant not receiving a high school diploma due to not passing the CAHSEE. Part of the problem, as discussed by Jason and Joy, was a fear of being called out as "special" given their disability label. The social stigma associated with being designated with a dis/ability was significant, causing some students to forego receiving a diploma rather than endure the ridicule associated with staying in school in special education. Although some students realized there were alternatives available to them such as attending and taking the CAHSEE at a community college, students like Jason and Brandon said they would be willing to return to MSHS the next year despite the possibility of facing ridicule and embarrassment.

While the option of staying until 21 would seemingly take the pressure off of having to pass the CAHSEE during the students' senior year, students grappled with the fear of facing not only other students' uncomfortable questions about returning to school, but also the fear of disappointing family members for not receiving a high school diploma in the typical four years. Indeed, this predicament did not originate with the students, but again illustrates the power of the social-psycho-emotional construction of ability and dis/ability that the students were forced to navigate internally and externally within the context of standardization and "high-stakes" testing. In other words, many students discussed how they were grappling with oppression due to being categorized as a student with a dis/ability. Jason explained:

> I don't want anybody criticizing anybody, especially me . . . I mean to be honest, I'll stay if I have to, to get my diploma even if I have to go through a living hell, excuse my language . . . I'm going to do what I have to do to get that diploma . . . for me,

for my benefit, to be at peace with that because as soon as I pass that CAHSEE
that's one step closer to my dreams.

Jason, like many students, repeatedly described the fear of being negatively spoken of by their peers due to not passing the CAHSEE. In other words, Jason, like his peers, experienced the disablism embedded within their testing environments as a result of larger policies. Importantly, Jason also describes the CAHSEE as a gatekeeper to achieving his dreams.

Connected to the historical legacy of eugenics and testing mandates that contributed to the social reproduction of hierarchies along lines of race, ability, and disability, the CAHSEE contributed to the perpetuation of a false narrative of those who can and those who cannot. The latter category is embedded within ideologies of individualism and meritocracy and notions of "grit." Furthermore, students in this study articulate the multiple forms of psycho-emotional disablism they experienced given overly simplistic and problematic notions of "normalization" that are deeply embedded in standardized tests and "high-stakes" testing policies like the CAHSEE.

Discussion and Conclusion

Today's overly simplistic policy discourse of a "grit/no grit" binary coupled with a continued emphasis on "high-stakes" testing has led to an educational culture of winners and losers that dangerously reinforces victim blaming and inequity. In this study, the narratives of Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities complicate the overly simplistic storyline of "grit" by demonstrating that simply "persevering," "working hard," or being "diligent" was insufficient to meet policy mandates, particularly given the type of individual learning support many students needed to advance their learning needs. In other words, despite students' demonstration of, and investment in "grit," students were in need of more multifaceted systems of educational support, including emotional support. This is indeed what special education is meant to ensure.

Abandoning overly simplistic notions of "Grit." From the students' accounts, the ideologies and practices associated with "grit" demonstrated how their perceived abilities and dis/abilities rendered them the "Other," as they faced differential consequences for being treated the same as their peers. Indeed, we found that the CAHSEE rendered differences in learning obsolete by requiring all students to pass the exam to receive a high school diploma, exacerbating rather than remedying inequalities. In continuing to assume "grit" to be a panacea for the challenges students face, school reform will continue to compound the very problems it intends to address. Importantly, the notion of a one-size fits all policy approach and narrative of "grit" inherently contradicts the intent of the special education system and its laws, such as IDEA, that center the individualization of educational programs for students with dis/abilities through a free and appropriate public education and least restrictive environment (Johns, 2016). By not adequately responding to students' individualized needs, policies that focus on standardized and "high-stakes" testing will continue to result in placing blame on the most vulnerably positioned students, inflicting emotional harm on the very students these policies were intended to serve.

Centering emotionality in education policy research. Given the psycho-emotional disablism students experienced, one important recommendation we offer for education policymakers and scholars is to move away from a linear, overly formulaic approach to education, and more explicitly recognize the role of affect and emotion in the analysis of education policies. As Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) note, "[p]olicies are suffused with emotions and with psychosocial tensions. They can threaten or disrupt self-worth, purpose and identity. They can enthuse or depress

or anger" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 8). Likewise, Clarke et al. (2015) state that it is not possible to adequately engage in critical policy without addressing affective and emotional aspects. Essentially, emotion is a form of policy translation in the documentation of how policy is interpreted as feelings and sentiments. Similar to Clarke et al. (2015), we think it is "difficult for critical policy to proceed productively without paying attention to the dimensions of emotion, affect and feeling because of the ways in which they shape and animate the fields of policy and practice" (p. 59). Thus, as educational policies continue to advance, particularly with the adoption of ESSA, it is important to study the ways race, ability, power, *and* emotion mediate interactions within social contexts and classroom spaces.

Considering and expanding the productive role of emotionality is also important at the epistemological, ontological, axiological and etiological levels for theory, research and practice. This is key for transforming school systems that enfranchise our students, as opposed to pushing awards and punishments for students based primarily on test outcomes. In addition, more research is needed to investigate asset-based expectations that are appropriate to bridge policy gaps to improve equity for all students (Liou & Hermanns, 2017; Rojas & Liou, 2017).

Anchoring student voices in education policy. Students' perspectives also point to the importance of making visible the ways standards and assessments continue to be "markers of socially constructed values and relationships . . . through which the knowledge, values, and assumptions of dominant social groups are often privileged in our educational system" (El-Haj & Rubin, 2009, p. 448). These values have significant emotional and material consequences for Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities. In other words, given dominant assumptions about who is normal and intelligent and who performs well in school and on tests, these values and ideologies embedded in our school systems have qualitatively different effects for Black and Latinx students with dis/abilities, than they would for, say, their White peers with the same disability label (Artiles, 2011, 2013). Thus, it is pivotal that students' voices are included to better understand how to harness systems of support to nurture students to meet their goals and aspirations. For example, within their systematic literature review from 1990-2010 U.S. student voice research in K-12, Gonzalez, Hernández-Saca, and Artiles (2016) found that positioning student voice for educational reform focused on 1) school change or improvement, 2) personal or group empowerment, or 3) teaching and learning (the school) curriculum. However, Gonzalez et al. (2016) critiqued their overall database of 49 studies for their lack of 1) interdisciplinary imagination, and 2) including the voices of historically marginalized youth at their intersections, especially students with dis/abilities, English Language Learners, and/or LGBTQIAA students. These conceptual and methodological omissions from the student voice literature greatly limits educational policy reform efforts in the spirit of honoring student voice for democratic schooling.

Moving toward student voice and intersectionality in education policy and practice. Shifts away from reliance on exit exams have become more commonplace, particularly with the passage of ESSA. This includes opportunities for states to consider addressing students' holistic needs (e.g., academic and social emotional). Currently, however, states have "flexibility" in how and in what ways they will meet students' needs. It becomes increasingly important therefore for local organizations, families, education practitioners and researchers to engage with and push local policymakers to focus not only on building students' individual skills–both academic and nonacademic–but simultaneously and seriously contend with how structures and schooling contexts facilitate learning. Doing so will require educators to think about schooling beyond a narrow focus on individual students and the boundaries of school buildings. This includes actively cultivating partnerships with health care service organizations, community-based organizations, and other social

service organizations to more adequately meet the needs of students, their families, and communities (Noguera & Kundu, 2014).

Furthermore, from a Critical Disability Studies approach, Goodley and Lawthom (2006) call for an alliance between Disability Studies and psychology that foreground the interconnectedness between service-delivery models that embrace complexity and flexibility to meet the needs of individuals with dis/abilities. Some of these include: a) rethinking impairment, b) recognizing and resisting the exclusive psychological elements of disablement, c) acknowledging the complex relationship between individual and social worlds, d) transforming institutions, and (e) developing emancipatory research practices[7].

Additionally, IDEA's primary focus on disability has resulted in limitations regarding how other identity categories (e.g., race, gender, language, socioeconomic status) intersect and converge with dis/ability, resulting in intersectional erasure (Cho, Williams, and McCall, 2013). In other words, it is essential to examine the convergence between race, dis/ability, and other identity categories within IDEA in order to move beyond a one-size-fits all approach, and more adequately understand students' multidimensional and intersectional lives. Although a growing number of policy scholars around the globe are studying how equity-oriented policies address intersectionality (see Robert, & Yu, 2018), there has been a dearth of empirical research conducted on intersectionality and equity-oriented education policies in the US. Thus, examining how multiple identity categories are taken-up in equity-oriented policies *and* exploring how these policies are translated in local contexts is an important yet overlooked piece of the policy puzzle in education research.

From a psycho-emotional disablism perspective we believe it is important to understand that Black and Latinx students labeled with dis/abilities experience educational spaces within their historical, social, and emotional contexts, and these systems are not devoid of power, privilege, and difference. Therefore, it is critical to have an awareness of how systems of oppression operate within policy and practice and to engage in systems change, particularly in order for special education to move beyond a focus on mere psychological aspects (Kozleski & Artiles, 2014). Doing so will enable scholars, educators, and policymakers to consider the interconnectedness of different disciplines and sectors of society for human development within and across contexts for freedom and social justice.

Finally, this study's findings challenge master narratives that construct Black and Latinx educational lives as pathological and outside of a particular hegemonic order—White, middle-class, able-bodied and "normal"-minded. This problem can no longer be placed on the shoulders of our most vulnerable students, reinforced by master narratives, such as "grit," that harm and further disable the very students that policies purport to enable. A new script and new script makers are required (Patton, 1998). So we end by asking, what would this new policy script look, feel, and sound like? We submit it must include a radical vision that embraces examining complex sociocultural, political, economic, *and* emotional contexts for Black and Latinx students labeled with disabilities within today's policy landscape.

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[7] This is what Hernández-Saca and Cannon (2016) also calls for in order to understand dis/ability as psycho-emotional disablism.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A:

Student Participants

Name	Race	Disability Label	Passage on CAHSEE Math	Passage on CAHSEE English
Brandon	Black male	Emotional/Behavioral Disorder & Learning Disability	No	Yes
DeShandra	Black female	Emotional/Behavioral Disorder	No	Yes
Drake	Black male	Emotional/Behavioral Disorder & Learning Disability	Yes	Yes
Edna	Latina (female)	Learning Disability	Yes	Yes
Esperanza	Latina (female)	Emotional/Behavioral Disorder	Yes	Yes
Jason	Black male	Learning Disability	No	No
Jerome	Black male	Emotional/Behavioral Disorder	Yes	Yes
John	Black male	Mild Intellectual Disability	No	No
Joy	Black female	Learning Disability	Yes	Yes
Jorge	Latino (male)	Emotional/Behavioral Disorder & Learning Disability	Yes	Yes
Kassandra	Black female	Learning Disability	Yes	Yes
Matthew	Black male	Mild Intellectual Disability	No	No
Phillip	Black male	Mild Intellectual Disability	No	No
TJ	Black male	Emotional/Behavioral Disorder	No	Yes
Tanya	Black female	Learning Disability	No	Yes

Appendix B:

Student Focus Group Protocol

Section 1: Introduction
- Introduce yourself and provide information about the purpose of study.
- Remind students that this interview attempts to understand students' perspectives and experiences with the CAHSEE and that they may withdraw from this study at any time without any consequences. Also, remind the students that they are free to refuse to answer any questions and still be part of this study.

Section 2: Students' Personal Information
- Ask for student names, ages, grade(s), race/ethnicities, amount of time at MSHS

Section 3: Perspectives about the CAHSEE
- First, please tell me about what your experiences have been taking the CAHSEE.
  - How do you feel when you're taking the CAHSEE?
    - Probe: prepared, nervous, anxious?
- Do you believe the CAHSEE is a helpful requirement for students?
  - Probe: Why or why not?
- Do you believe there are problems with the CAHSEE?
  - Probe: Why or why not?
- What do you think about how the CAHSEE tests what you all have been taught and what you know?
- What are your thoughts about why some students do not pass the CAHSEE?
  - How would you describe the experiences of students in special education with the CAHSEE?
- Why do you think some students pass the CAHSEE?
- What do you think will happen to those students in special education who pass the CAHSEE?
- What do you think happens to those students in special education who don't pass the CAHSEE?
- If you were able to talk about what your gifts and talents are what would they be?
  - Do you think the CAHSEE fairly assesses those gifts and talents?
- How well do you think the CAHSEE tests what you know?
- Provide student passage rates of different subgroups of students on the CAHSEE and get their reactions:
  - African American-45%
  - Latino-50%
  - White-75%
  - Asian-76%
  - English Learner-28%
  - Special Education-23%
  - Probe for why they believe passage rates for different racial groups are so different

- Probe for why they believe there are different passage rates for the special education and general education students

Section 4: CAHSEE & Opportunity to Learn
- Do you believe you are given adequate opportunities to learn to prepare for the CAHSEE?
  - Probe for whether or not they believe they have the necessary resources-computers, calculators, books, qualified teachers-needed to adequately prepare for the exam.
- By law, each of you has the right to receive accommodations/modifications that are in your IEPs while you are taking exams, including the CAHSEE. Have you all received your appropriate accommodations?
  - Have you received these accommodations each time you have taken the CAHSEE? If not, what happened?
  - Do you think the accommodations are helpful to you to pass on the CAHSEE, if so, how? If not, why not?
- Are both the Math and English CAHSEE preparation courses helpful? Is one more helpful than the other? If so, why?
- What do you think about the English Prep course having both students in both special education and general ed. together?
- Do you think general education teachers are effective in teaching you what you need to know to pass the exam?
- Do you think those who have designed the CAHSEE have taken the needs of special education students into consideration?

Section 5: Experiences in Special Education and with the CAHSEE
- Can you tell me about your experience in special education?
- How do you think, if at all, your experience in special education is different from students who are in general education?
- How do you think, if at all, your experience in special education affects your performance on the CAHSEE?
- When taking the CAHSEE, how do you feel?
  - Probe: Do you feel frustrated? Excited? Prepared? Relieved? Anxious? Angry? If so, why?
- When you feel this way how does it make you feel about your academic ability?
  - Probe: Do you think students are more likely to study harder, attend class more and participate in class or do you think it does the opposite?
- What do you think about your teachers and the principals?
  - Probe: Do you think they care about whether you pass the exam? How about your parents? Are they concerned about the exam?.
- Has the CAHSEE ever made you feel like giving up in school?
- Do you know anyone in special education who left/dropped out because they felt frustrated with the CAHSEE? Why do you think this happens? Have you ever felt like leaving because of the CAHSEE?

Section 6: Education Policy
- Many policymakers want all students to take the CAHSEE because they believe it will motivate you to study and work harder in school so that when you graduate you will be more prepared to work. What are your thoughts about this?
- If you could tell the policymakers about how the test has impacted your life, what would you tell them?
- Finally, what are your future plans after you leave MSHS?
  - Are your plans different depending on whether or not you pass the CAHSEE?
    - Probe: If so, how? If not, why not?

End by thanking them for participating in this study!

Section 1: **Appendix C:**

Individual Student Interview Protocol

Introduction
- Introduce yourself again and remind the students of the purpose of the study.
- Remind the students again that the interview attempts to understand students' experiences with the CAHSEE. Note to students: Just to remind you, you may withdraw from this study at any time without any consequences. You are also not obligated to answer all questions and you are free to refuse to answer any questions and still remain in the study.

Section 2: Personal Information
- Name, Age, Race/Ethnicity, Grade, Amount of time at Morning Sun High School

Section 3: Experiences with and Perceptions of the CAHSEE
- Remind student what they said during the focus group about the CAHSEE and ask them more specifically about their experiences.
- What are your general experiences with and thoughts about the CAHSEE?
- How do you feel about having to take the CAHSEE in order to graduate from high school?
- How do you feel about the English CAHSEE preparation course?
- How do you feel about the Math CAHSEE preparation course?
- In what ways, if any, do you believe the CAHSEE helps students in special education?
- In what ways, if any, do you believe the CAHSEE does not help students in special education?
  - o Probe for how they feel before, during and after they take the exam.
  - o Probe for how concerned they are about passing (or not passing) the exam
  - o Probe for how they feel the test will affect them in the long run

Section 4: Exploring Academic Engagement
- How important is it that you pass the CAHSEE?
- How do you think the requirement to take and pass the CAHSEE affects your effort in school?
  - o Probe for how hard they try in school as a result of the exam (e.g. Do you make more of an effort to do your homework? Do you pay attention more in class? Do you make more of an effort to go to class?)
  - o Probe for whether or not they believe the exam tests their knowledge and abilities.
- Do you think the CAHSEE accurately assesses what you know? Why or not?
  - o If not, what makes the CAHSEE inaccurate in assessing what you know?
- Do you spend time on your own preparing for the CAHSEE?
  - o Probe: If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
- Why do you think you passed and some of your classmates did not?
  - o Probe: Did you study harder? Pay more attention in class? Did you seek out extra help?

Section 5: CAHSEE & Opportunity to Learn
- What do you think helps students pass the CAHSEE?
- What do you think makes it difficult to pass the CAHSEE?
- In what ways are you prepared (or not prepared) to take and pass the CAHSEE?
    - Probe for whether student feels teachers teach the material needed to pass the exam.
- What are your feelings about students in special education being required to pass the CAHSEE in order to graduate?
- In what ways, if at all, do you think your experience is different from students who are not in special education in terms of having to take and pass the CAHSEE?
    - Probe for whether or not they think it's easier or harder for them and in what ways (EX: Do you receive more one-on-one help?)
- Show the student a sample math problem from the CAHSEE. If you were to see this math problem on the CAHSEE, how would you approach it? How do you feel as you see the problem? What's going through your mind? Please just talk out loud about what you're thinking.
- Provide them with two math problems:
    - What is x-4=8? (Provide four options for the students to choose from).
    - Ask if they've been taught the information to do the math problem
    - Probe them about their feelings as they see the question and set out to answer it

Section 6: Future Plans
- If you pass the CAHSEE, what will you do after high school?
    - Probe: What will happen if you don't pass?
    - Probe for the opportunities that will be available or not available if they pass or do not pass
        - Will they go to community college?
            - How does that make them feel?

 End by thanking them for taking the time to participate in this study

Appendix D:

Observation Protocol

- Include teacher name, date, title of class, time/period, number of students in class
- Provide description of the climate of the classroom, focusing on:
  - Curriculum and instruction offered to students
    - Consider:
      - The format of the lesson, differentiation offered in class, instructional dialogue between teacher and students, accommodations offered to students, specific instruction related to the CAHSEE
  - Emotional climate in the classroom
    - Consider:
      - Positive or negative classroom climate, students engagement and emotional responses to teacher
  - Observe organizational structure of the classroom
    - Consider:
      - Physical layout of the class, where learning materials are placed, and what materials consist of

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Adai is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her scholarship focuses on how educational policies aimed at improving equity among students at the intersections of race, disability, language, and other sociocultural differences are enacted and experienced by educators, leaders, and students, particularly within classroom, school, and community contexts. A second strand of her scholarship focuses on knowledge mobilization – improving the accessibility and usability of research. She is particularly interested in studying knowledge mobilization efforts focused on the advancement of educational equity for historically marginalized learners.

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David is an assistant professor at the University of Northern Iowa. The nucleus of his research agenda is problematizing the common sense assumptions of what learning disabilities are. His three lines of research are (a) the emotional impact of learning disability labeling on conceptions of self, (b) the role of emotion and affect in teacher learning about social justice issues, and (c) transition plans and programming for historically marginalized youth with disabilities at their intersections and their families.

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Ashlee is a doctoral student studying Educational Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research focuses largely on educational equity; predominantly in out of school spaces. Her recent work has been two-fold in 1) investigating the role of adolescent engagement in afterschool programs, and 2) exploring the relationship between community level demographic shifts and exclusionary discipline practices.

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