Black Special Educators' Stories of Belonging with Colleagues – A Qualitative Study

By

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Abstract

Black special education teachers (BSETs) remain underrepresented in the profession and often face racialized dynamics that shape their professional experiences. This study explores how BSETs experience collegial belonging and what conditions support or diminish that experience. Guided by frameworks that conceptualize belonging as social, spatial, and political, the study responds to the minimal research on educator belonging—particularly for those who have been historically marginalized in schools. Using a qualitative narrative design, the study employed a story completion task followed by optional, semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis guided interpretation, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how BSETs made sense of their professional relationships and working conditions. Participants' experiences of collegial belonging were shaped by how they were perceived, how colleagues enacted relational competencies, and whether they had access to meaningful opportunities for connection and contribution. These dynamics were deeply influenced by trust, cultural responsiveness, and shared commitment to students—but were also constrained by racialized assumptions, misrecognition of expertise, and exclusion from decision-making spaces. These insights informed the development of the integrated model of collegial belonging, which builds on existing frameworks but is grounded in the lived realities of BSETs. Rather than something to be granted or presumed, belonging is reframed as a justice-oriented process that must be intentionally cultivated through equity-minded relationships and structural inclusion.

Keywords: Black special educators, collegial belonging, social support, collaboration, sense of belonging, inclusion

Dedication

to Murray and Audrey, may you always remain curious

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Chapter 1: Purpose and Rationale

According to the American Psychological Association (APA; 2022), 94% of workers said it is important for them to feel a sense of belonging at work, and 92% stated that their workplace should support their emotional well-being. This shift in workplace expectations reflects a broader understanding of the modern workplace as not only a source of income but also a space that can foster psychological safety, relational affirmation, and professional fulfillment. Research confirms this transformation: meaningful workplace connections are linked to increased engagement, productivity, and organizational commitment (Coqual, 2020).

However, the same APA (2022) survey revealed that one in five employees reported a lack of belonging at work, with Black workers more likely than their white and non-Black peers to report feeling unsupported by colleagues. These disparities reflect longstanding research that documents individuals from historically excluded groups, particularly those who are numerically underrepresented in their workplaces, face persistent challenges to feeling included (Allen et al., 2021; Bristol, 2020; Ferdman & Deane, 2014; Kanter, 1995; Winters, 2013). When employees feel excluded or disconnected from workplace culture, they are more likely to leave, resulting in increased turnover and the loss of valuable perspectives and contributions from a diverse workforce.

Nowhere is this issue more urgent than in education. Although schools and districts have invested in efforts to recruit Black educators—recognizing their value to students' academic and social-emotional development (Redding, 2019), Black educators remain twice as likely to express a desire to leave the profession compared to white teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). As Love (2023) contends, the issue is not recruitment but retention. Schools and districts continue to fall short in creating environments that are inclusive and

affirming for Black educators, particularly for BSETs, who navigate the dual marginalization of their racial and professional identities.

Anti-Blackness in Schools and Racial Terminology

This study is grounded in the understanding that schools do not exist in isolation from the social and historical conditions of the broader society. As such, the experiences of BSETs must be situated within the larger context of systemic racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness; forces that continue to shape whose knowledge is valued, whose expertise is trusted, and whose presence is seen as essential within educational institutions.

Although schools may espouse values of equity and inclusion, they are embedded in structures that have long excluded and marginalized Black educators (Bristol, 2020; Love, 2023; Matias & Mackey, 2016). These systems not only fail to affirm Black teachers, but they also often rely on their labor while denying them belonging. Any meaningful effort to explore collegial belonging must reckon with these realities and recognize that Black teachers are navigating not only interpersonal dynamics but also deeply entrenched institutional ideologies. In naming these conditions, I also want to acknowledge the importance of language. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *Black* rather than *African American* to reflect a more inclusive, diasporic, and politically conscious understanding of racial identity. This choice aligns with current conventions in critical race and education scholarship and is further explained in Appendix A.

Conceptualizing Belonging for BSETs

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "belonging" to refer to the sense of being seen, valued, and included in one’s professional community. However, I treat belonging and inclusion as interrelated concepts. Tulshyan (2022) defines inclusion as the active practice of

welcoming and affirming those from historically marginalized communities. Inclusion, in this framing, requires intentional action. Scholars of belonging would argue such action must be accompanied by meaningful relationships (Allen, 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Miller, 2003). Absent relational affirmation, inclusion lacks substance and impact.

Based on these definitions, I take the stance that belonging is predicated on being in relationships with colleagues, with students, and within the broader institutional culture. Belonging is not an individual trait or a passive feeling, but something co-constructed through reciprocal, affirming, and sustained interpersonal interactions. For BSETs, whose professional realities are often shaped by isolation and marginalization, belonging requires colleagues who not only recognize their expertise but also engage with them as full and equal partners in the work of schooling. This understanding guides the present study and frames belonging as a relational and systemic experience, not merely a personal or emotional one.

Belonging and Retention: Why It Matters

Universally, we all desire to belong (Hirsch & Clark, 2019). To exist in spaces and with people who make us feel seen, valued, and respected for who we are (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall et al., 2008; Hagerty et al., 1992; Mahar et al., 2013). However, for individuals who have historically been excluded (i.e., not members of historically powerful identity groups), feeling included can be challenging, especially in spaces where they are numerically the minority (Allen et al., 2021; Bettez, 2010; Bettini et al., 2021; Bristol, 2020; Kanter, 1995; Ferdman & Deane, 2014; Winters, 2013).

This challenge is well-documented in special education, where BSETs often report a lack of belonging or a sense of alienation (Bristol, 2018; Cormier, 2022; Scott 2020; Scott et al., 2021). These experiences reflect the intersecting realities of racial isolation—given that Black

educators remain underrepresented in schools (Billingsley et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020)—and professional marginalization, as special educators frequently encounter ableism, exclusion from schoolwide initiatives, and misrecognition of their expertise (Baustien Siuty, 2019; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Osgood, 2007). This is alarming for several reasons. Firstly, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and motivation to leave the profession correlate with educators' sense of belonging (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Without that sense of belonging, teachers are more likely to consider leaving the profession. Sustaining special educators in schools, therefore, requires intentional collegial support and inclusive leadership practices (Billingsley et al., 2023).

These supports are especially critical for Black educators, who, regardless of their professional role, are twice as likely as their white counterparts to report wanting to leave the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019). In addition to the racialized challenges they face, their roles as special educators place them within a profession already marked by high attrition rates (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Research has long shown that special educators experience significant emotional stress and burnout, which further exacerbates turnover in the field (Brunsting et al., 2014). As a group situated at the intersection of these two high-risk categories, BSETs—who make up only 8.5% of the workforce (Billingsley et al., 2019)—are among the most likely to leave. This is a reality the field cannot afford to ignore—especially as schools increasingly recognize that retaining a diverse special education workforce is not just a matter of representation, but essential to ensuring students benefit from the pedagogical expertise, cultural knowledge, and advocacy that Black educators provide (Ellis-Robinson et al., 2023; Milner et al., 2022; Redding, 2019). Consequently, understanding BSETs' experience of belonging or what

they need to feel included could be essential to creating the infrastructure Bettina Love describes as needed to "keep them, protect them, and affirm their Blackness" (Love, 2023, p.1).

The Need to Center BSETs' Voices

However, the field has relatively little insight into how BSETs' sense of belonging is conceptualized, built, or maintained. Although numerous studies describe the exclusion and alienation BSETs face (see Table 1), there is a lack of research focused on how BSETs conceptualize, experience, and define belonging themselves. As a note, the BSET featured in the table also worked in schools where they constituted the racial minority amongst their fellow staff members. Hence, they experience being marginalized both as Black educators, special educators, and a few as male educators.

Yet, the absence of shared identity markers amongst staff should not be the reason why BSETs feel alienated at school. As Tulshyan (2022) reminds us, inclusion cannot be assumed, and schools are no exception. Too often, they maintain norms marginalizing the very educators they claim to support. Therefore, we must ask BSETs what belonging looks and feels like to them. Centering the voices of those most impacted by injustice is not only an ethical imperative—it is a catalyst for reimagining more just and affirming schools (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1970).

Statement of the Problem

Persisting in a profession where one feels invisible or unsupported is a significant challenge, and yet, this is the reality for many BSETs. Their experiences of exclusion, particularly in their interactions with white, general education colleagues, signal a need to examine how workplace relationships contribute to or undermine a sense of belonging.

If we are committed to inclusive schools, we must take seriously the everyday relational dynamics that define them. The issue is not simply whether educators desire inclusion, but how inclusion is defined and enacted within school cultures shaped by whiteness. Belonging cannot be presumed or standardized based on dominant norms. Instead, it must be actively cultivated through practices that affirm diverse ways of being, relating, and contributing within professional communities. Critically, this means understanding how BSETs experience collegial belonging, what they need from their colleagues, and how systems can shift to meet those needs.

Theoretical Approaches to Belonging

Although belonging is widely recognized as crucial to well-being and workplace inclusion, the concept itself has been theorized in multiple ways across various disciplines. Some frameworks emphasize internal psychological states, while others focus on external conditions and relational contexts. In this study, I draw on three contemporary frameworks that approach belonging as both a social and structural phenomenon. Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework for belonging offers a systems-level model that identifies four interrelated components—competencies, motivations, opportunities, and perceptions—that interact to shape one's experience of belonging over time. Louie et al.'s (2022) radical belonging framework situates belonging within a broader struggle for justice, highlighting the importance of mutual care, solidarity, and collective action, especially for individuals whose identities have been historically devalued. Page et al.'s (2021) spatial theory of belonging shifts attention to the material, relational, and pedagogical spaces in which belonging is enacted or denied. These frameworks offer a multidimensional perspective on understanding how belonging is shaped not only by individual relationships but also by institutional norms, physical environments, and

professional opportunities. Taken together, they inform the analytical approach of this study and the design.

Purpose of the Study

Guided by these frameworks, this study explores how BSETs' interactions with colleagues influence their sense of belonging. While prior research has richly documented the exclusion and isolation BSETs often face, it has less frequently focused on the conditions and collegial behaviors that foster inclusion and connection. As Johnson et al. (2012) stated, "teachers have chosen a career in which social relationships are central, and they find that their work with students is influenced heavily by the relationships they form with other adults—their principal and their colleagues—in the school" (p. 27). This study builds on and extends that insight by centering BSETs' perspectives on what supports their sense of professional belonging and how everyday interactions shape their experiences within schools.

By focusing on collegial relationships, this study sheds light on how BSETs interpret and navigate the daily interactions that define their place within school communities. These relationships are not neutral—they carry messages about whose voices matter, whose expertise is recognized, and who is expected to belong. In centering BSETs' reflections, this research offers insight into how school cultures can either reinforce marginalization or foster a sense of shared investment and professional affirmation.As such, the following research question guided this study:

1. How are Black special education teachers' sense of belonging shaped by interactions with colleagues?

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the problem, outlines the study's purpose, and presents the research question and guiding frameworks, including a discussion of racial terminology and the broader sociopolitical context of anti-Blackness in education. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on workplace belonging, teacher retention, and the experiences of BSETs. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, including data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 identifies the study's findings, organized into three themes with subthemes. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature and frameworks, concluding with implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

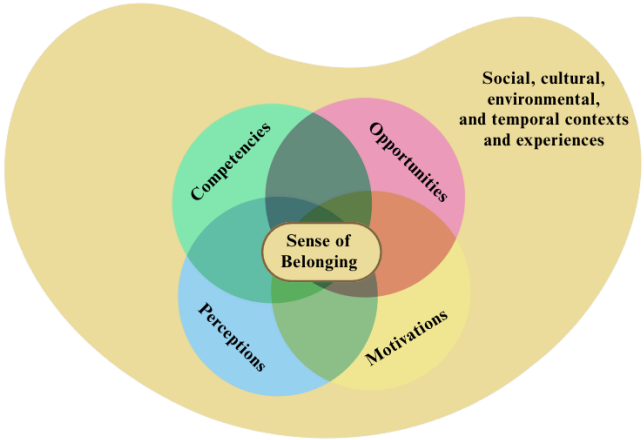
This chapter establishes the rationale for examining how collegial relationships shape BSETs' sense of belonging and highlights the need for further research in this area. I first introduce a framework by Allen et al. (2021) for conceptualizing belonging that draws on multiple theoretical and empirical perspectives to describe how belonging is fostered. I then highlight the benefits of social belonging in the workplace and the contextual and relational factors frequently cited as contributing to one's social belonging. Next, to create clarity and consistency, I discuss how the factors are interconnected to concepts from the integrative framework for belonging. Using this framework, I demonstrate how BSETs' experiences of social belonging are shaped by intersecting forms of marginalization—namely racism and professional devaluation—that stem from their racial identity as Black educators and their role as special educators. I provide evidence from individual narratives corroborating how these barriers limit opportunities for developing meaningful collegial relationships. This chapter concludes by examining two additional frameworks—radical belonging (Louie et al., 2022) and spaces of belonging (Page et al., 2021)—that call for reconceptualizing belonging in schools. I demonstrate how these three frameworks, when considered together, provide a lens for understanding how BSETs navigate their sense of belonging with colleagues. Their integration illustrates that authentic belonging for BSETs requires not just individual adaptation but transformative changes to school structures and practice—insights that are useful in creating school environments that effectively sustain and retain BSETs.

An Integrative Framework for Conceptualizing Belonging

As described, the need to belong is universal. Yet, belonging is more than just the opposite of loneliness, disconnection, or alienation (Allen, 2020); it is a dynamic construct that "is facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences involving the social milieu, which dynamically interact with the individual's character, experiences, culture, identity, and perceptions" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 88). The complexity has generated a diverse body of literature, which has benefited from the understanding of the nuances of belonging and made it challenging to compare research across disciplines. Drawing on multiple theoretical and empirical perspectives of belonging, Allen et al. (2021) developed an integrative framework to conceptualize belonging, aiming to create clarity and consistency for future research. The framework comprises four interrelated components—competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions of belonging—that reinforce and influence one another over time to develop an individual's sense of belonging (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Allen et al. (2021) Integrative Framework for Belonging



Note. An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. Reprinted from "Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research," by K. Allen, M. L. Kern, C. S. Rozek, D. M. McInerney, and G. M. Slavich,

2021, *Australian Journal of Psychology, 73*(1), p. 92. (https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1890296)

The first component is *competencies* for belonging, which entail possessing the social skills and abilities necessary to connect and experience a sense of belonging. Drawing on research from Blackhart et al. (2011), Allen et al. (2021) describe the social and emotional skills needed to experience belonging as "being aware of oneself and others, emotion and behavioral regulation, verbal and nonverbal communication, acknowledgment and alignment with social norms, and active listening" (p. 92). Additionally, it includes cultural competency, which is described as one's ability to be mindful of their heritage, the place they are in, and alignment with relevant values. The display and use of these skills can reinforce a person's sense of acceptance and inclusion, helping them cope effectively with feelings of not belonging (Harrist & Bradley, 2002; Frydenberg et al., 2009).

Secondly, the framework considers how availability impacts one's sense of belonging by considering the *opportunities* to connect with others. For instance, in schools, a student's sense of belonging is directly associated with their attendance (Akar-Vural et al., 2013; Bowles & Scull, 2019). This implies that regardless of whether one has the skills to connect, they need to be in spaces (physical or virtual) where there are individuals to connect with. Putnam (2001) elaborates on this concept by distinguishing between different types of connections that people experience. The first is relationships individuals build in homogeneous groups or within a community of people sharing similar backgrounds and demographics, referred to as bonding social capital. Claridge (2018) gives examples of homogeneous groups, such as: family members, close friends, and neighbors. The other entails broader connections that transcend class, race, religion, and sociodemographics, called bridging social capital. Pelling and High (2005) describe these relationships as often between people with shared interests or goals but

contrasting social identities. Putnam (2001) acknowledges that distinguishing between the two types is not always clear, given the dynamic nature of relationships, but notes that bonding social capital often reinforces exclusive identities, whereas bridging social capital promotes looking outward and fostering connections between those who typically do not associate with one another. Overall, creating and having opportunities for belonging are foundational for enabling positive interactions.

Another component of belonging is one's *motivation* to be part of a group. Although belonging is viewed as a fundamental need, motivators for belonging are unique and likely to reflect individual, contextual, and cultural differences. For example, motivators may vary depending on whether one belongs to an indigenous or non-indigenous group, resides in an urban or rural setting, or values collectivism or individualism (Allen et al., 2021). Furthermore, people are not only motivated to connect with others but also with places, cultures, or other ethnic backgrounds. Allen et al. suggest that when examining the nature and function of motivators of belonging, one should be explicit and mindful of describing how this diversity plays a role.

Finally, even in the presence of all other components, one might still report dissatisfaction with their sense of belonging because of their *perception.* A person's perception of belonging is informed by both their subjective feelings and past experiences (Coie, 2004). For instance, an individual who has had negative experiences of belonging (i.e., been socially rejected, ostracized, or 'othered') may consciously or subconsciously perceive that they are socially undesirable (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2007) or become skeptical of others and interpret their behaviors to be signs of exclusion (e.g., Schall et al., 2016). Given that perceptions of belonging are informed by past experiences, research suggests that marginalized individuals, racial minorities (e.g., Rainey et al., 2018), disabled individuals (e.g., Gardner et al., 2019), and

those who identify as sexually and gender diverse (e.g., Rainey et al., 2018), experience belonging-related stressors more intensely (Allen et al., 2021; Walton & Brady, 2017). Consequently, “these subjective experiences and perceptions of those experiences thus act as feedback mechanisms that increase or decrease one’s desire to connect with others” (Allen et al., 2021, p. 94).

This emergent and dynamic framework represents the first attempt to synthesize the diverse literature on belonging across disciplines. While the authors acknowledge that much remains unknown about the framework’s applicability across contexts and the ways its components intersect, it offers a valuable opportunity to pursue further research on this timely and important topic. As such, I plan to draw on three components (i.e., opportunities, perceptions, and competencies) from the integrative framework to situate my research. Yet, before doing so, I describe current research on educators' sense of belonging, specifically social belonging, as it is (a) frequently discussed in the literature (e.g., social support, collegial support, team efficiency, social networks) and (b) has been cited by BSETs as lacking (see Table 1). In later sections I will draw parallels between the language used in the social belonging research and the three components from the integrative framework for clarity and consistency purposes. Furthermore, I will elaborate on the components and illustrate how BSETs are disadvantaged by their professional identity and race in experiencing social belonging within schools.

Social Belonging in the Workplace

Developing or feeling a sense of belonging depends upon multiple factors, but a crucial one is experiencing social support (Jolly et al., 2021; Waller, 2020). Although social support and belonging have been conceptualized in various ways, their presence has been associated with a range of positive impacts, directly for both employees and organizations. Benefits have included

employees reporting higher levels of engagement in their work (McClure & Brown, 2008; Waller, 2020), increased confidence in their roles (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008; Waller, 2020), and overall competency in their field (Filstad et al., 2019). Furthermore, positive supports lead to better health outcomes and have been found to act as buffers against workplace stress (Viswesvaran et al., 1999; Waller, 2020). Furthermore, organizations experience more collaborative work environments, characterized by honest communication and positive interactions (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008; Waller, 2020), and employees express higher commitment to their jobs (Davila & Garcia, 2012; Jolly et al., 2021).

In schools, similar findings have been found, with positive collegial relationships and a sense of belonging contributing to educators' job satisfaction, desire to remain teaching, and student achievement (Clandinin et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2012; Pesonen et al., 2021; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Additionally, research on early-career educators has found that experiencing a sense of belonging among colleagues offers a buffer against the stressors of learning to teach and navigating the expectations of a new job (Bjorklund, 2023). Given the numerous benefits social supports offer employees, a growing body of literature across various research disciplines (e.g., psychology, organization, diversity, and education) has explored the antecedents necessary to foster these positive relationships. In reviewing the research, I found three contextual and relational factors promote the likelihood of experiencing social support and, in turn, expressing a sense of belonging. I discuss the three factors (i.e., social networks, psychological safety, and trust) and what researchers have revealed about their importance to schools and marginalized educators (i.e., special education teachers [SETs], teachers of color [TOC], and special education teachers of color [SETOC]), when available.

Social Networks

Before establishing collegial relationships that offer support, individuals must first have the ability to access and connect with individuals readily within the workplace, known as an employee's social network (Putnam, 2001). Social networks within schools are present at multiple levels, and educators have relations dyadically (i.e., one-on-one), within their grade level or department, and within their school and district. Research has found that strong social networks within schools have improved innovation (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Liou & Daly, 2018), teaching practices (Liou et al., 2017; Sinnema et al., 2022), curriculum and policy implementation (Coburn & Russell, 2008), student achievement (Daly et al., 2021), and employee job satisfaction (Edinger & Edinger, 2018; Zewude et al., 2021). These outcomes may stem from the fact that the more accessible the environment is for connection, the more opportunities employees have to tap into each other's resources (e.g., knowledge, ideas, advice, contacts, material goods, emotional support) and better achieve individual or organizational goals (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Social Networks for Marginalized Educators

For SETs, access to social networks and collegial support has played a crucial role in their intent to stay and overall job satisfaction. For instance, in a literature review of special education teacher attrition and retention, Billingsley and Bettini (2019) found several studies correlating special educators' access to overall support (i.e., school district, administration, collegial, and other support) with greater intent to stay (Berry, 2012; Kaff, 2004). Additional studies found associations between specific social supports and special educators' intent to stay, including (a) administrators (e.g., Albrecht, 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Conley & You, 2017), (b) colleagues (e.g., Albrecht, 2009; DeMik, 2008; Jones et al., 2013; Lopez-Estrada & Koyama,

2010), (c) district leaders (e.g., Lopez-Estrada & Koyama, 2010), and (d) other specialist support (e.g., Albrecht, 2009), illustrating how access to a range of networks is critical for special educators feeling effective in their roles and wanting to remain in them.

In the study conducted by Lopez-Estrada and Koyama (2010), which examined factors that contributed to five Mexican American special educators' desire to remain teaching in Texas, they highlighted how participants were more willing to remain in the field when they established a ‘sense of family’ or ‘la familia’ with a variety of colleagues (i.e., general educators, special educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators).These studies demonstrate the positive consequences of access to social networks (i.e., desire to remain teaching, job satisfaction), but they give limited attention to the experiences of SETOC. A recent study by Mason-Williams et al. (2023), however, found that marginalized educators—specifically SETOC—experience weaker access to social resources. This lack of access contributes to a diminished desire to remain in the profession, illustrating the urgent need to center sociocultural identities when examining special educator retention and attrition.

Psychological Safety

In addition to access, employees must perceive their social networks and the work environment as a psychologically safe space. Edmondson (2018) describes psychologically safe places as spaces where employees believe they can speak candidly about their ideas, questions, and concerns without fear of retribution (also see Tulshyan, 2022). Teams and organizations who express psychological safety have experienced (a) an improved ability to overcome obstacles, especially in knowledge-demanding, high-stakes environments where there is a need for collaboration, (b) greater longevity of employees, and (c) supportive and inclusive learning environments (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Sanner & Bunderson,

2015). Although research on psychological safety within education is relatively minimal (e.g., Edmondson et al., 2016; Hackett et al., 2021), collaboration has been central to educators' jobs for the past decade (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Whether engaging in professional learning communities, instructional teams, or co-teaching, teachers' social networks have expanded—placing increasing pressure on them to demonstrate their effectiveness in a climate of continual change (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Day & Gu, 2007; Newman et al., 2017). As these collaborative demands intensify, schools must create conditions that foster psychological safety.

Psychological Safety for Marginalized Educators

As discussed in the section about belonging, historically marginalized individuals can struggle to feel a sense of belonging, especially in spaces where they are numerically the minority (Bristol, 2018, 2020; Kanter, 1995). This is particularly relevant in schools and higher education, where the majority of educators are white. As such, to address this inevitable barrier, affinity groups have been created for TOC and SETOC, where they can discuss challenging school-based experiences (Bristol et al., 2020; Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Scott & Proffitt, 2021; Strong et al., 2017). Although not all researchers use the term 'psychologically safe' to describe these groups, the outcomes identified from belonging to affinity groups are synonymous with being psychologically safe. For example, Bristol (2020) concluded that the experiences of Black male preservice teachers in an affinity group "provided a space for participants to share their needs and challenges, without fear of judgment or criticism from others in the group" (p. 493). As a result of these spaces, participants were able to problem-solve effectively and "build a collective body of knowledge for responding to institutional oppression and achieving professional development goals" (p. 494). Similarly, in a study of three women SETOC (2 Black

women and 1 Latina woman), they shared how the group offered them a space to speak freely about the challenges and frustrations they experienced at the intersections of race and ability, which allowed them to build connections and learn from one another (Kulkarni et al., 2022, p. 55). The authors noted these spaces are critical to SETOC and provide them support that can "reduce burnout, strengthen resistance, and center healing" (p. 57). The psychological safety experienced in affinity groups for TOC has also been associated with "better understanding and inter-relationships" with those outside of the group, illustrating the potential for these groups to cultivate bridging capital and improve belonging in diverse groups (Strong et al., 2017).

Relational Trust

Another intrapsychic state, similar to psychological safety and equally relevant to one's sense of belonging, is the presence of relational trust. Edmondson (2018) differentiates between the two by noting that psychological safety captures whether a person believes that *others will give them* the benefit of the doubt when taking risks (e.g., an instructional team). In contrast, trust involves *giving another person* the benefit of the doubt (e.g., in a dyadic relationship). Trust has been studied more extensively in schools, with research correlating trusting relationships with lower levels of teacher burnout, stress, and anxiety (Huang et al., 2019; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2015; Yin et al., 2018) and in return, higher levels of job satisfaction and intent to stay at their job (Allensworth et al., 2009; Hopkins et al., 2019). Furthermore, in a longitudinal study conducted by Bryk and Schneider (2003) with 400 elementary schools, schools with high levels of relational trust were more likely to mark improvements in student learning, highlighting how trust is critical in schools across groups (i.e., educators and students).

Trust for Marginalized Educators

Research on how trust influences teachers' desire to remain teaching reveals that trust is uniquely influential to SETs. In two quantitative studies, Hopkins et al. (2019) and Jones et al. (2013) both found that special educators who reported high levels of relational trust (Hopkins et al., 2019) or collegial support (Jones et al., 2013) were significantly less likely to leave their jobs, compared to their general education colleagues. Given that SETs spend a substantial amount of time interacting with other educators (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010), these findings illustrate how the quality of these relationships influences their desire to continue teaching.

Although qualitative research exploring the concept of trust remains scarce in the special education literature, seminal work by Tschannen-Moran (2001) elucidates the existence of a reciprocal dynamic between collaboration and trust. Concurrently, a more substantial body of research has explored how collaborative, positive relationships influence job satisfaction among SETs and SETOC. For example, research examining the interpersonal relationships of SETs has illustrated how collaborative relationships with general educators positively impact their sense of effectiveness and satisfaction in their role. SETs describe how not only working in schools that provide time for general educators and SETs to meet but also where they engage in discussions about curriculum and how to best support students' needs impacts whether they feel included within the school (Bishop et al., 2010; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Youngs et al., 2011). In a more recent study by Bettini et al. (2022), they also described that when SETs believed their general education colleagues held an attitude of care and acceptance toward students with disabilities, this fostered a cooperative dynamic that better facilitated addressing those students' needs. This sentiment was captured in a statement by a SET who said, "You feel it when you walk into their room [general educators], they love my kids" (p. 104).

While research often highlights the harmful experiences that SETOC have with general educators (discussed in later sections), one study by Cormier et al. (2022) offers a counterexample. A Black male special educator described a positive co-teaching experience, sharing, "She's [general education teacher of color] been helpful to me being in the room, and I think that's why I pretty much excelled this year because they [co-teachers of color] both have been very supportive" (p. 87). His account underscores a recurring theme in the literature: strong, dependable relationships with colleagues who share similar racial or cultural backgrounds can foster a greater sense of inclusion and belonging. For example, in a study by Scott and Alexander (2019) that examined how to recruit and retain Black male SETs, a participant described the importance of having a mentor in his preparation program who shared his racial and professional identity: "I don't know if I would have made it through the program if I did not have someone who could understand that, as a Black man, I need more than a surface relationship…he really help[ed] guide me" (p. 242). Furthermore, several participants in a study of Black male SETs' social ties expressed how they felt they had more "genuine, authentic, and meaningful" relationships with Black colleagues at their school compared to their white colleagues (Cormier, 2022, p. 99). They described how the trust they built in each other at school translated to them supporting and engaging outside of school (e.g., attending church, gathering their children to play, going out for barbecue), which positively impacted their job satisfaction.

Framing Race and Role in the Literature

As introduced in Chapter 1, this study is grounded in the recognition that BSETs' experiences are shaped by structural forces such as racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness. These forces also influence the scholarship available on this topic. Although teacher retention has been widely studied, research increasingly shows that identity markers—such as race,

gender, and professional role—significantly shape teachers' experiences of inclusion and their decisions to stay or leave the profession (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Dixon & Griffin, 2019; Scott, Cormier, et al., 2022; Scott, Taylor, et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2023). Nevertheless, despite this growing recognition, few studies focus specifically on the intersecting experiences of BSETs. As a result, this chapter draws on several overlapping bodies of literature, including research on special educators, Black educators, and teachers of color in special education.

The terms used across these studies vary widely, including African American, teachers of color, special educators of color, and Black educators. To ensure clarity and alignment with this study's framing, I use the term Black throughout, following current conventions in critical education research and as explained in Appendix A. When discussing specific studies, I retain the language used by the original authors or participants, where relevant. This framing is essential, as the following sections synthesize literature across disciplines and identity categories to establish what is known—and what is missing—about the conditions that shape collegial belonging for BSETs.

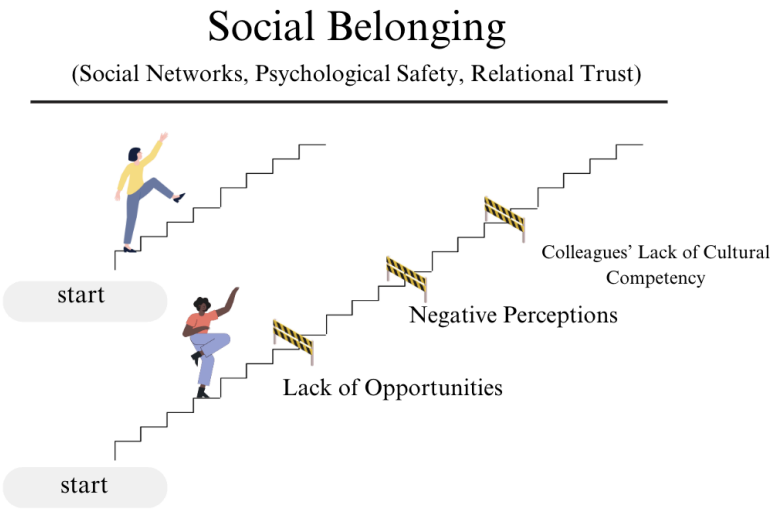
Barriers to Social Belonging for BSETs

As evidenced by the research, schools that create opportunities for educators to access social networks that are psychologically safe and where they can foster trusting relationships are beneficial to multiple stakeholders (e.g., educators, students, and schools as learning organizations). However, for educators who have been historically marginalized in schools, these factors can be spatially and relationally challenging, resulting in a sense of disconnection and potentially harmful consequences for both the individual and the school as a community. In this section, I draw parallels to the integrative framework for belonging and then situate, using individuals' descriptions of their experiences (when available), how BSETs are more likely to

experience threats to these components of belonging based on their racial and professional identities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Barriers to Black Special Educators' Social Belonging



Note. This figure illustrates that Black special educators encounter multiple barriers when developing social belonging at school, including a lack of opportunities, negative perceptions, and their colleagues' lack of cultural competency.

Lack of Opportunities to Belong

The ability to form social networks depends on opportunities to connect with others, just as the integrative framework for belonging suggests. This requires individuals to physically access spaces at like times to build connections. However, for Black educators and special educators, time and space have been persistent barriers leading to feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging in school. In this section, I will present how BSETs' lack opportunities to belong in school based on historic legislation and the placement of students with disabilities in segregated settings.

Brown v. Board of Education

Arguably, Black educators have experienced the greatest threat to their opportunity to belong in school with the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education,* which reduced Black teacher employment by an average of 41.7% and was preceded by a significant decline (66%) of Black students majoring in education (Thompson, 2022). Although, at the time, the ruling was a "generational victory for the cause of racial equality," it came at a cost, and Thompson (2022) illustrates through his research on how student integration affected Black teacher employment that "many of the costs associated with transitioning to a more equitable education system were paid by Black teachers" (p. 979-980). For Black educators who retained their positions, forging connections with their white counterparts was likely a turbulent process. Many of these Black educators continued to engage in civil rights activism, campaigning for the reinstatement of Black colleagues who had been displaced. Simultaneously, their proficiency in instructing white students remained under constant scrutiny despite holding higher credentials compared to white educators. (Fenwick, 2022; Fultz, 2004). These circumstances, amongst many others, likely resulted in Black educators struggling to view school as a place where they belonged, and although by the mid-1970s, many of the patterns of dismissal diminished, the "damage had been largely done" (Fultz, 2004, p. 34). Decades later, schools continue to be dominated by white female educators, and despite continual efforts to recruit Black educators, they are not entering the field (Villegas & Davis, 2008). Although it would be an oversimplification to attribute the dearth of Black educators solely to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, it is undeniable that we once had an opportunity to create educational institutions that mirrored and represented the diversity of our communities. Perhaps the inclusion of Black educators alongside Black students would have created an opportunity for schools to be places of belonging for all.

Spatial Boundaries Within Schools

Although there has been a shift toward a wider array of service delivery models for students with disabilities, including an increased emphasis on inclusive education in general education settings (Artiles et al., 2010), the historical reality has been one of segregation, where students with disabilities have been separated from their peers. This systemic segregation has, in turn, resulted in SETs being historically assigned to instructional spaces that have limited their opportunities to connect to the broader teaching community. Research from the early 2000s indicates that these spaces ranged from basements and remote corners of school buildings to portable classrooms located outside the main premises (Griffin et al., 2008; Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005). SETs described that the physical separation directly impeded their opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and perpetuated feelings of isolation and detachment. One SET described how isolated they felt, stating, “We don’t hear anything out here; no one drops by” (Griffin et al., 2008, p. 151). Moreover, SETs required to move across multiple instructional spaces also feel that they lack opportunities to connect with colleagues because they are spread too thin (Kaff, 2004). Lastly, while it is acknowledged that there has been an increasing physical presence of SETs within general education settings (Gilmour et al., 2023), the history of segregating students with disabilities and SETs in separate spaces has contributed to their perceived status as belonging to a distinct profession, separate from that of general educators (Baustien Siuty, 2019; Osgood, 2007). Consequently, despite them being more proximal to their colleagues, many SETs continue to grapple with feelings of disconnection and detachment, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

Harmful Perceptions

According to Walton and Cohen (2007), individuals or groups who experience repeated social rejection or a history of rejection are often perceived unfavorably by those considered part of the in-group. This phenomenon holds for BSETs, who frequently encounter harmful stereotypes based on their race and belonging to special education, which undermines their sense of psychological safety and belonging within their professional communities. In this section, I will examine how these detrimental perceptions of their capabilities and roles have negatively impacted their sense of psychological safety, leading them to consider leaving the profession altogether.

Disciplinarian First, Teacher Second

Research on BSETs' working conditions and social interactions consistently reveals a persistent stereotype that they are expected to take on disciplinarian roles rather than being valued for their instructional expertise, especially male educators. As one educator bluntly stated, "An issue that I do have is that I'm a Black male, and I'm not small compared to the other teachers, so it's like, 'Call Coach [Jackson] for all the, for anything that goes beyond [teaching]. Call Coach [Jackson] to come try to solve the situation down'" (Cormier et al., 2022, p. 84). Another described that he felt an expectation to support behavior but then was not supported when he asked colleagues for academic support for students: "...Everybody is like, 'Nah. We don't want to do that [academic support], but can you take Little Johnny [a Black child with a disability] with you?" (p. 88). This perception leads colleagues to disproportionately rely on Black male special education teachers (BMSETs) to manage student misbehavior, specifically for students of color. It places them in contentious positions that undermine their psychological safety. For instance, BMSETs describe that when they are summoned to support behavior, they

are conflicted by their desire to support the student and their colleagues, but also feel fatigued and concerned that they are neglecting their professional roles. One BMSET noted that, "Colleagues would routinely send misbehaving students into his classroom during his planning periods and, more troubling, when he was teaching" (Bristol & Mentor, 2018, p. 226). Another lamented, "They [general education colleagues] would bring me all the little Black boys that were mouthing off…instead of trying to understand and build a relationship, they [colleagues] would rather kick them out their class and send them to me" (Scott, 2020, p. 10). Similarly, another educator described themselves as the "unofficial security guard enforcer" (Scott et al., 2021, p. 193). The excerpts suggest that BMSETs are not only frequently pigeonholed into disciplinarian roles based on their race and gender, but that there is a lack of value in their ability to instruct and teach, a harmful narrative stemming from *Brown v. Board of Education*. These biased expectations and role assignments not only undermine Black educators' professional identities and abilities but also contribute to feelings of frustration, as expressed by one participant: "...They view you as a Black person, and you're not as smart as them [White colleagues] or you don't know what you're talking about. I go through that stuff all the time" (Cormier et al., 2022, p. 85). Another BSET described it as "there are constantly people that are trying to try you [testing his academic skills] in a sense, and they're trying to test your knowledge of content and your management of the classroom" (Scott et al., 2021, p. 191). Similarly, a participant who belonged to an affinity group at her school expressed, "They'll [white colleagues] be like questioning my every move…then on top of that, if I like to suggest, it's like they try not to hear me" (Kulkarni et al., 2022, p. 52). In all the personal stories highlighted, BMSETs only discussed these issues with their administrators, if at all. This hesitance highlights the barriers constructed by the narrow perceptions cast upon them by their

white counterparts, creating an environment where they fear judgment, ultimately compromising their sense of psychological safety and impeding their ability to voice their concerns openly.

Belonging to a Distinct Profession

BSETs encounter threats to their psychological safety stemming not only from pernicious stereotypes related to their racial identity but also from being in the field of special education. Personal accounts from SETs paint a disheartening picture of their roles being widely diminished and perceived as less than by general education colleagues, referring to their roles as feeling equivalent to a “second-class citizen” (Naraian, 2010, p. 1681) or a “step-child” (Kaff, 2004, p. 12). While others express that "future special educators need to be forewarned that they will not be perceived as 'real' teachers" (Dieker et al., 2003, p. 335). The perception of SETs as belonging in a subordinate role fosters feelings of alienation from general educators, leading them to perceive judgment for how they approach their work. For example, one SET who was expected to co-teach felt that because she held the SET title, her colleague thought she should “be there focusing exclusively in some ways on the IEP kids” (Naraian, 2010, p. 1682), while another professed that they were fearful their colleagues thought they were not “doing enough” (Stark & Koslouski, 2021, p. 67). A BSET shared how she felt like her colleagues belittled her, commenting,“...it’s like they try not to hear me…they try to tear me down, to make me feel like I did something wrong when all I’m here doin’ is looking out for these Black and Brown babies” (Kulkarni et al., 2022, p. 51). A more stark account reveals, “They didn’t want anything to do with me, not particularly on a personal basis, but...it was special ed...and I represented that” (DeMik, 2008, p. 29). Even when complimented for their work, the language used by general educators often reinforces ableist notions and undermines the legitimacy of SETs' professional roles. For instance, referring to them as "saints" portrays their work as an overwhelming

challenge rather than a legitimate educational profession (Griffin et al., 2008). Such language, although intended as praise, perpetuates the marginalization and delegitimization of SETs by casting them as exceptional beings rather than skilled professionals. These harmful perceptions might also be why, despite general and special educators being more proximal to one another and sharing instructional space, the co-teaching structure of "one teach-one assist" (Friend et al., 2010, p. 20) persists (Hackett et al., 2021; Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016). Although a recent meta-synthesis on co-teaching reveals some SETs are comfortable with the one teach-one assist structure (e.g., Strogilos et al., 2023), it is unclear whether their comfort is a result of their feeling of being psychologically safe and valued members of their instructional teams or if it is because SETs have continuously been cast in subordinate roles that have evolved into habitual practice. There is likely more to their stories, but the existing stories overwhelmingly illustrate how harmful perceptions about SETs' roles and identities disrupt their psychological safety and present challenges for inclusive education.

Overall, BSETs are flooded by a history of harmful perceptions as a result of their racial identity and association with special education. These perceptions are legitimate threats to their psychological safety and contribute to their lack of belonging in schools. The responsibility of addressing and reframing these perceptions lies with white educators (discussed in later sections). Although efforts have been implemented (e.g., diversity training), these efforts might not be capturing the intersectionality of these harmful perceptions or explicitly addressing how these perceptions impact not just students but also BSETs. Consequently, rebuilding and repairing schools and teams' psychological safety is fraught with barriers.

Lack of Cultural Competency on Behalf of Colleagues

As Allen et al. (2021) note, developing a sense of belonging requires relational competencies—skills such as communication, active listening, and emotional awareness. These competencies can be learned through modeling, direct interaction, or explicit teaching. Yet, when it comes to connecting across cultural or identity differences, such skills are often underdeveloped or neglected by members of dominant groups. Tulshyan (2022) attributes this neglect to a combination of societal and individual factors, noting that white Americans are often socialized in racially homogeneous environments and rarely disrupt these patterns in adulthood; in fact, 67% report having social networks that are almost entirely white (Jones et al., 2022). Similarly, the historical exclusion of disabled individuals—through institutionalization and segregation—has limited opportunities for cross-ability interaction, leaving many able-bodied people ill-equipped to engage inclusively. A 2014 study found that 67% of people reported discomfort when interacting with individuals with disabilities (Scope, 2014).

Although lack of exposure may help explain these skill gaps, it does not excuse them. On the contrary, it underscores the heightened responsibility that white, able-bodied educators have to unlearn exclusionary norms and actively develop cultural competencies. Because they occupy positions of institutional power and influence, their ability or inability to build trust and affirm difference significantly shapes the learning and working environments of others. BSETs and SETs have repeatedly expressed concern about their colleagues' limited skills in supporting Black and disabled students, noting that this lack of cultural competency undermines trust and creates barriers to collegial belonging. The following section expands on these concerns through firsthand accounts from BSETs who describe the relational harm caused by colleagues' inattention to difference and failure to engage in culturally responsive ways.

SETs' Experiences of Spatial Boundaries and Ableist Views of Students

The negative attitudes and biases held by general educators towards students with disabilities, particularly those transitioning between settings like general education classrooms and resource rooms, fuel a concerning lack of trust from SETs. However, their caution about the appropriateness of general education settings may further alienate students to separate settings. For instance, hearing or perceiving general educators describe students with disabilities as "spoiled or entitled" (Bettini et al., 2022, p. 103) or lacking agency over their behaviors, believing instead that "they kinda turn it on and turn it off when they want to" (p. 103) demonstrates to SETs how their colleagues lack awareness about the nature of disabilities–but also a lack of trust in the students' experiences and abilities. Another noted that she believed "some teachers will see that IEP…, the little [symbol], next to their name [on electronic attendance system] …and anything that they do wrong, it's an immediate phone call to their case manager" (Baustien Siuty, 2019, p. 1039). This heightened scrutiny and disproportionate attention placed on students with disabilities, even for minor incidents, leads to SETs perceiving the general education classroom as an unsafe place for students.

Furthermore, this constant scrutiny of students can also cause SETs to feel "worn down" and, at times, limit their students' access to certain spaces because they are fearful of the judgment they will endure from their colleagues if the student 'misbehaves' (p. 1040). This sentiment is captured in the following quote wherein a SET explained to a student why they could not use the restroom: "...because today I'm not in the mood to get an email because somebody's gonna say that you talked loud down there…When you do something, the whole school hears about it …because somebody's gonna tell me about it" (p. 1040). Similarly, another SET wanted to "keep my chicks in the nest for a long time, learn the skills and then let them fly"

when describing her reservations about transitioning a student from the resource room to the general education setting (Bettini et al., 2022, p. 104). These accounts illustrate how general educators' mistrust of students with disabilities exacerbates SETs' mistrust of the general education setting and general educators, further contributing to the isolation of these students and the emotional burden on their teachers.

BSET's Experiences of Racist and Ableist Views of Students

BSETs perceive a significant lack of cultural competency on the part of their white colleagues, which inspires them to persist in their roles as advocates and role models while simultaneously reflecting a concerning lack of trust and benevolence towards these colleagues. Various personal accounts from qualitative research illustrate instances where BSETs have witnessed or overheard their white colleagues make insensitive, stereotypical, or outright discriminatory comments about their Black students with disabilities and their families. For example, one BSET recounted overhearing a colleague make disparaging remarks about the parents of their students, suggesting they "probably didn't know how to read" (Scott, 2020, p. 10). Another BSET shared a disturbing account of a colleague exhibiting "full-blown, blatant racism" towards Black students, prompting the BSET to feel compelled to "look out for these babies...my Black kids with disabilities" (Kulkarni et al., 2022, p. 51). These comments undoubtedly create a challenging work environment, with another person describing, "Like, you want to say something— but you know that you have to work with these people" (Scott, 2020, p. 11).

Such experiences underscore the BSETs' perception that their white colleagues lack the cultural competency and understanding necessary to effectively support and nurture their Black students with disabilities. This perceived lack of cultural competency not only fuels the BSETs'

sense of responsibility to advocate for their students but also reflects a profound lack of trust in their colleagues' ability to provide adequate instruction and care without their presence. Scott et al. (2021) described that many BSETs in their study felt the need to "shield" their students from their white colleagues' "misguided beliefs about their behaviors and academic abilities" (p. 192), suggesting a lack of trust in their colleagues' benevolence – their genuine concern for the well-being and success of these students. Another noted how she felt the need to "push back against racial bias at meetings where her white colleagues pathologized students of color for not conforming to the dominant culture" (Baustein Siuty, 2019, p. 1043). Additionally, BSETs express a belief that they can better connect with and gain the trust of parents of their Black students with disabilities due to a shared understanding of their experiences, implying a lack of confidence in their white colleagues' ability to establish such connections. This lack of trust and perceived lack of benevolence is compounded by the sense of "disability battle fatigue" experienced by BSETs, who find themselves "constantly advocating for their students, whom they often perceive as mistreated in their schools" (Kulkarni et al., 2022, p. 54).

The need for constant advocacy not only takes an emotional toll but also reveals a deep, ongoing distrust in the system's ability to care for Black students with disabilities in the absence of BSETs' direct intervention. Consequently, while the perceived lack of cultural competency among their white colleagues inspires BSETs to persist in their roles as advocates, role models, and champions for their students, it simultaneously undermines the foundation of trust and benevolence that should underpin collaborative relationships within the educational system. This dynamic not only impedes a sense of belonging for BSETs but also raises concerns about the persistent lack of cultural responsibility on behalf of white colleagues.

Exclusionary Behaviors Toward BSETs

Black special educators often feel a profound lack of trust and benevolence from their white colleagues due to persistent experiences of exclusionary and discriminatory behavior. They recount feeling unwelcome at social gatherings, with activities chosen that "were more appealing to White people" and white colleagues deliberately isolating themselves, leading to a sense that "sometimes you're not even considered" (Cormier, 2022, p. 95, 98). Overt racism, though not always overt, manifests in microaggressions like being told to change one's hairstyle or dress to appear more "approachable" (p. 95). There is a pervasive uneasiness in relationships with white colleagues, particularly white women deemed "untrustworthy in general," stemming from lived experiences of racism and marginalization (p. 96). Black educators perceive differential treatment, with white colleagues receiving preferential scheduling, more substantive feedback, and greater support, while they face admonishment for lacking resources to supply their classrooms (Kulkarni et al., 2022; Scott, 2020). The constant undertone of disrespect, being "looked down on" (Scott, 2020, p. 8), and having one's authority undermined breeds an environment where Black educators cannot feel fully accepted or trusting of their white counterparts.

Calls to Reconceptualize Belonging in Schools for Marginalized Groups

While traditional conceptualizations view belonging primarily through an individualistic Western lens focused on personal experiences of agency, worth, and power, emerging perspectives challenge this limited view. Even Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework, which acknowledges threats to the belonging of marginalized individuals, still centers on individual experiences. This individualistic framing proves inadequate for understanding how people who have faced systemic injustice develop a sense of belonging. Given that this study examines how

BSETs experience belonging—a group that has encountered overlapping forms of marginalization—it is crucial to incorporate alternative, more collectivist frameworks that adopt sociocultural and race-conscious lenses.

Two frameworks offer particularly valuable perspectives: radical belonging (Louie et al., 2022) and spaces of belonging (Page et al., 2021). Though not specific to BSETs, these frameworks address key gaps in traditional belonging theory. Radical belonging expands the concept beyond individual feelings to encompass communal relationships and collective responsibility for affirming others across differences. Meanwhile, spaces of belonging illuminates how material segregation, relational dynamics, and pedagogical practices position special educators at the margins of school communities—a marginalization compounded for BSETs by racial dynamics. In the following sections, I review each framework in depth before demonstrating how their integration with the integrative framework offers a more comprehensive lens for examining BSETs' lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion within school communities.

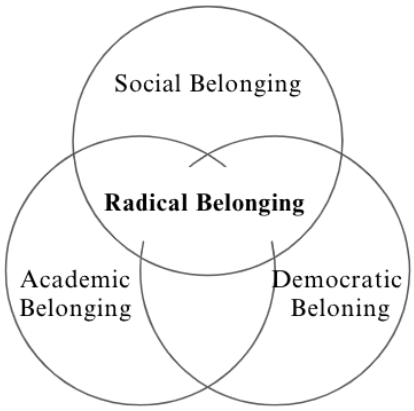
Radical Belonging

Radical belonging is presented as a framework that conceptualizes school communities as "actively, and constantly, working to radically transform the fundamental nature of schooling, centering the experiences, epistemologies, and ways of being of students and families of color in order to support their social, academic, and democratic belonging" (Louie et al., 2022, p. 3; see Figure 3). As such, the framework's authors reject 'inclusive' policies and interventions to promote belonging that situate students of color as in need of fixing (Gutiérrez et al., 2002) or that aim to have students of color assimilate to white envisionments of success, especially since many of these interventions fail to account for how racism within schools impacts their

effectiveness (Louie et al., 2022). Instead, it emphasizes the need to expand views of student belonging that are multidimensional (i.e., social, academic, and democratic belonging) and that necessitate a radical transformation of the fundamental philosophies, practices, and power structures that have conventionally centered on whiteness.

Figure 3

Louie et al. (2022) Radical Belonging Framework



Note. Aspects of radical belonging. Adapted from "Toward radical belonging: Envisioning antiracist learning communities," by N. Louie, L. Roeker, K. Nichols, M. Pacheco, and C. Grant, 2022, *Race, Ethnicity and Education,* 25(1), p. 96 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2106879). Copyright 2022 by Taylor & Francis Group.

One aspect that radical belonging resituates is social belonging. Where conventional views of social belonging focus solely on individual students' internal feelings and experiences, radical belonging situates social belonging as "intertwined with and inseparable from a sense of concern and responsibility for others' belonging" (Louie et al., 2022, p. 5). That is, one cannot experience true belonging while seeing or treating others in their community as devalued members. As such, drawing on research from Louie and Pacheco (2021), they paint the picture of social belonging "as comprising a constellation of relationships and interactions" where people both give and receive love, care, and respect (Louie et al., 2022, p. 7). For students of color, it is emphasized that receiving care requires others in the community to not only center students'

racialized identities and experiences but also stand against oppression (i.e., solidarity) and embrace students' diverse contributions (i.e., mutuality) for reimagining an educational environment where all students feel valued and connected.

In contrast to traditional conceptualizations that position social belonging as merely an antecedent or prerequisite for learning (Arslan, 2019; Slaten et al., 2016; Voight et al., 2015), the radical belonging perspective underscores the interdependence and mutual reinforcement of social and academic belonging (Louie et al., 2022). Rather than viewing them as sequential steps, this framework recognizes how cultivating an authentic sense of social belonging necessitates nurturing academic belonging through “agentic, responsive, collaborative, and anti-hierarchical” learning environments (p. 9). Academic belonging involves students developing academic knowledge that is linked to their existing epistemologies, fostering positive racial identities as holders and creators of valuable cultural knowledge, and engaging in relationships where diverse perspectives are valued as equally intellectual and important to the learning community (Louie et al., 2022). Louie et al. (2022) argue that such environments actively decenter whiteness by authentically building upon students' lived experiences and funds of knowledge. Consequently, they create spaces where social affirmation and intellectual empowerment coexist and reinforce one another organically throughout the learning process. For instance, when teachers engage students in collaborative inquiry that legitimizes their cultural wealth as valid sources of knowledge, it forges an intertwined sense of social belonging through affirmation and academic belonging by positioning them as capable co-constructors of knowledge.

These learning structures foster a critical examination of societal realities, enabling all community members, including students and adults, to experience a genuine sense of democratic belonging. Drawing on research from participatory action (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire,

1970) and critical consciousness (e.g., Freire, 1970), Louie et al. (2022) argue that these elements are crucial for creating an antiracist learning environment dedicated to enacting justice-oriented change. They describe how a lack of critical consciousness undermines authentic belonging, as it enables the privileged to remain ignorant of the barriers to belonging confronted by marginalized groups. Furthermore, democratic belonging extends beyond merely examining oppressive structures; it necessitates praxis, where community members engage in collective action to transform their social realities (Louie et al., 2022). This collective action entails and prioritizes students of color, their families, teachers, and staff as equal stakeholders with complete autonomy, agency, and mutual accountability in shaping school policies and practices (Louie et al., 2022).

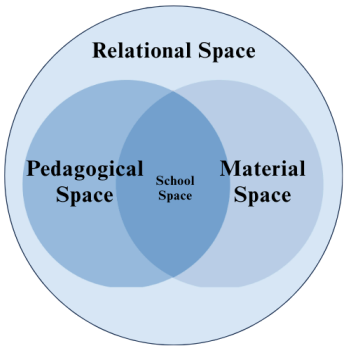
To conclude, radical belonging transcends individualistic notions of belonging. It upholds an ethic of mutual care, collective empowerment, and shared responsibility for cultivating an environment where all members experience validation of their multifaceted selves (Louie et al., 2022). Furthermore, it pays pointed attention to dismantling systemic forces that deny the belonging of students of color in society. Framing belonging through the multidimensional aspects of radical belonging offers an alternative vantage point for examining how a genuine sense of belonging is nurtured and maintained within schools. Applying this lens could prove crucial in illuminating the experiences and sensemaking processes through which BSETs construct a sense of belonging with predominantly white educators.

Spaces of Belonging

Drawing on spatial theory (Soja, 1996) and research by Baroutsis and Mills (2018), which situates three key spaces of belonging—material, relational, and pedagogical—Page et al. (2021) challenge prevailing narratives in special education (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Page et al. (2021) Spaces of Belonging Framework



Note. Spaces of Belonging Framework. Adapted from "Innovative learning environments and spaces of belonging for special education teachers," by A. Page, J. Anderson, and J. Charteris, 2021, *International Journal of Special Education,* 36(1), p. 10 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1968518). Copyright 2021 by Taylor & Francis Group.

They advocate for an "alternative space" that fosters inclusion and belonging for students with disabilities and SETs. A key focus is rethinking *material* spaces - the physical school environments that have historically segregated students with disabilities from their peers. This systemic separation has likewise marginalized SETs, relegating them to isolated instructional spaces disconnected from the broader teaching community. Page et al. (2021), along with scholars like Daniels et al. (2017) and Osborne (2016), argue for reconfiguring school facilities as truly shared, flexible spaces accessible to all learners and educators. Such spatial integration could diminish artificial boundaries and create more opportunities for meaningful interactions between general and special educators.

Beyond the material dimension, Page et al. (2021) underscore the importance of cultivating positive *relational* spaces through these increased social connections across the general/special education divide. As SETs' roles evolve from working in secluded spaces to contributing more centrally to all students' learning experiences, the quality of their interpersonal relationships and interactions with general education colleagues becomes critical for fostering

SET belonging and the formation of their professional identity (Page et al., 2021). This transition toward more inclusive educational models opens up possibilities for reimagining the *pedagogical* space—how teaching and learning occur. It enables shared instructional approaches, where special education and general education teachers jointly share teaching responsibilities through a co-teaching model (Friend et al., 2010; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). However, Page et al. (2021) emphasize that for co-teaching to be truly effective, it must embody a collaborative ethos in which the roles of both educators are oriented around facilitating student-driven inquiry and fostering autonomous learning capabilities. Rather than defaulting to traditional teacher-centered pedagogies, this envisions a pedagogical space where special and general educators collectively nurture more self-directed, exploratory learning experiences for all students.

Overall, Page et al. (2021) pose that school environments have historically divided general education and special education, seeing them as separate realms and harming SETs' sense of belonging. However, this binary can be deconstructed by redesigning schools' material, relational, and pedagogical spaces to be more supportive and inclusive. Cultivating integrated physical layouts, nurturing collaborative interdisciplinary interactions, and implementing innovative co-teaching models provide the opportunity to position SETs as synergistic to the school community, thereby fostering a deeper sense of belonging.

My Interpretation of the Belonging Frameworks

Although the integrative framework for belonging (Allen et al., 2021), radical belonging (Louie et al., 2022), and the spatial theory of belonging (Page et al., 2021) were developed independently and emphasize different dimensions of belonging, I interpret them as converging in meaningful ways that illuminate how BSETs come to experience collegial belonging within schools. Each offers a distinct but complementary perspective—psychological (Allen),

sociopolitical (Louie), and spatial (Page)—that, when brought into conversation, provides a more layered and holistic conceptual frame for understanding belonging as both personally felt and structurally mediated (see Table 3).

All three frameworks suggest that belonging is not simply an internal state but is shaped through dynamic interactions with people, systems, and environments. When viewed through a collegial lens, Allen et al.'s (2021) framework draws attention to the interpersonal dimensions of belonging—how colleagues perceive and respond to one another, how motivations for connection develop, and how competencies are enacted or recognized. These interpersonal conditions are not neutral; they are often filtered through dominant cultural norms and implicit biases, which can lead others to overlook or undervalue the expertise, voice, and cultural ways of being of BSETs.

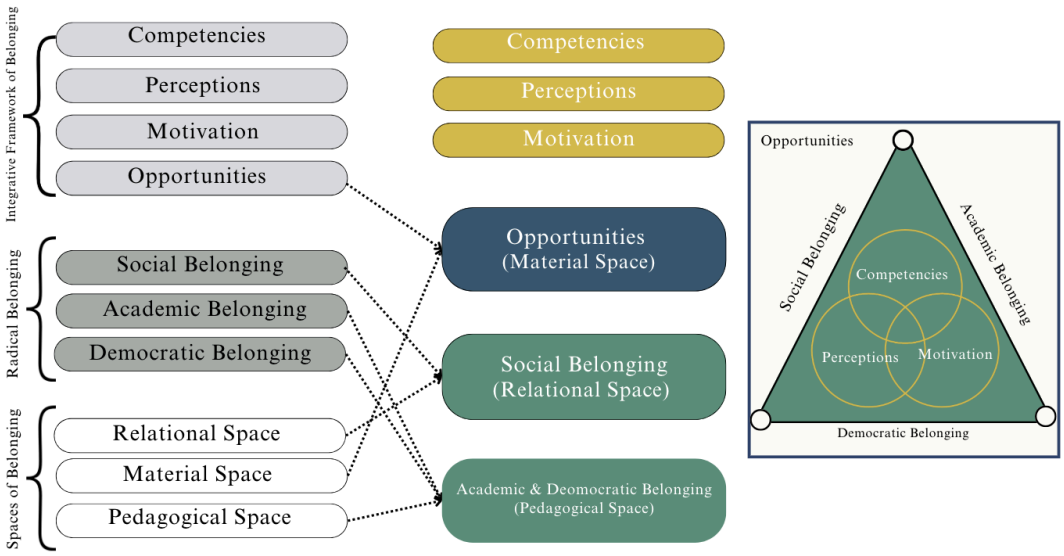
Page et al. (2021) extend this analysis by offering a spatial lens, showing how belonging is materially, relationally, and pedagogically structured. In schools, BSETs are often physically and professionally marginalized—assigned to isolated classrooms, excluded from collaborative planning, or overlooked in school-level decision-making. Page's concept of material space helps explain how institutional design and physical separation constrain opportunities for collegial engagement, regardless of a teacher's motivation or skill. Their concepts of relational and pedagogical spaces address the quality and reciprocity of professional interactions, including who collaborates, whose knowledge is taken into account, and how instruction is co-constructed.

Louie et al.'s (2022) radical belonging framework, although originally developed in the context of students, offers a justice-centered perspective that is equally applicable to educators. Their focus on mutual care, solidarity, and collective responsibility reframes collegiality as more than friendliness or participation—it becomes an ethical practice rooted in co-creating affirming,

antiracist environments. From this perspective, collegial belonging is not merely about being invited into a space, but about being acknowledged as a full participant in shaping that space. Belonging, then, is sustained through reciprocal affirmation and shared commitments to equity—not conditional on assimilation or silence.

Figure 5

A Synthesis of Belonging Frameworks



Note. This figure represents a conceptual synthesis of Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework for belonging, Louie et al.'s (2022) radical belonging, and Page et al.'s (2021) spatial theory of belonging. The dotted lines represent connections across the components.

The diagram I created (see Figure 5) reflects how I interpret these frameworks as overlapping and mutually reinforcing. The outer blue square represents material space (Page et al.) and aligns conceptually with the opportunities in Allen et al.'s (2021) model, highlighting how school structures and spatial arrangements create or constrain the conditions under which belonging can occur. Within that material context, the green triangle depicts three types of opportunities for belonging adapted from Louie et al. (2022): social, academic, and democratic. These domains align with Page et al.'s additional spatial categories: relational space corresponds to social belonging, and pedagogical space encompasses both academic and democratic

belonging. At the center of the triangle are the interpersonal conditions identified by Allen et al. (2021): competencies, perceptions, and motivations. These processes shape, and are shaped by, how BSETs are received by colleagues and positioned within each domain of opportunity. The dashed lines in the diagram illustrate how elements from the original frameworks map onto one another—for example, the relationship between material space and opportunity, and how the triangle's corners represent spatial and sociopolitical dimensions. These visual connections illustrate how interpersonal dynamics are embedded within broader institutional contexts.

Taken together, this integrated model highlights that collegial belonging for BSETs is not merely an internal feeling or the result of individual dispositions. It is constructed through the interplay of interpersonal dynamics and structural conditions—conditions shaped by how schools are organized, whose knowledge is legitimized, and whether mutual care and shared accountability are present. Belonging is not guaranteed by proximity or compliance; it is cultivated through everyday practices of recognition, inclusion, and relational equity.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how collegial belonging is both vital and vulnerable for BSETs, shaped by intersecting professional and racial identities that place them at the margins of school communities. Drawing on a vast body of literature, I examined the contextual and relational conditions that foster or inhibit social belonging in the workplace—particularly access to social networks, psychological safety, and relational trust—and how these conditions are often compromised for BSETs by structural barriers, exclusionary practices, and harmful perceptions.

To frame these issues conceptually, I drew on three distinct but overlapping frameworks: Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative model of belonging, Louie et al.'s (2022) radical belonging, and Page et al.'s (2021) spaces of belonging. Taken together, these frameworks provide a layered lens

for understanding collegial belonging not only as a personal experience but as one that is socially constructed, structurally mediated, and ethically negotiated. Each framework foregrounds different mechanisms—psychological, spatial, and sociopolitical—that shape how belonging is made possible or denied in schools, especially for those positioned outside of dominant norms. My interpretation of their convergence offers a way to analyze how BSETs' belonging is facilitated (or foreclosed) by colleagues' perceptions, institutional arrangements, and shared commitments to equity.

While student belonging has long been emphasized in educational discourse, the belonging of educators, especially those charged with advancing inclusive and culturally responsive practices, has remained comparatively underexamined. This gap is especially pressing for BSETs, who are often called upon to support the most marginalized students while navigating environments that fail to affirm their own identities, expertise, and needs. As I have argued, belonging is not merely an individual feeling but a product of reciprocal recognition, structural access, and collective care.

By centering the experiences of BSETs and drawing from a multi-framework conceptual lens, this study investigates how everyday collegial interactions shape their sense of belonging within schools. Rather than examining how BSETs adapt to existing institutional norms, the study focuses on the conditions that foster relational affirmation. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations about equity and educator retention by emphasizing the need to redesign school systems in ways that affirm and sustain the participation of those historically marginalized within them.

Chapter 3: Method

Given existing research that shows BSETs often face exclusion and isolation in their work environments, my purpose for this study was to explore how collegial relationships can support and foster their sense of belonging. I assumed that BSETs are experts in naming the relational dynamics that impact their experiences of belonging. This assumption guided my methodological choices, which were designed to center their voices, challenge dominant narratives of belonging, and prioritize their knowledge as a source of insight and change. Thus, I undertook a narrative inquiry methodological approach and utilized a story completion task followed by optional, semi-structured interviews to address my research question: How are Black special education teachers' sense of collegial belonging shaped by interactions with their colleagues?

The following sections of this chapter detail my positionality, rationale for using narrative inquiry methods and reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), the design and development of the story stem, participant recruitment and selection, the administration of the story completion task and optional interviews, the procedures for introducing the research process to participants, and my explanation of the analytic process.

Researcher Positionality

I understand that my identities and perspectives are continuously evolving. Throughout my five years in this doctoral program, I have self-identified as an inclusive educator, researcher, supervisor, professor, and mother of two children. These evolving roles have unfolded alongside significant societal events, including the global COVID-19 pandemic, a national reckoning with systemic racism and police violence (evidenced by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others whose stories went unreported), and an increasingly

polarized political climate. These intersecting experiences, combined with my personal history, have shaped not only how I see and engage with the world but also how I make sense of knowledge and understandings of truth—recognizing that these are not fixed or singular, but continually shaped by time, context, and reflection (Banks et al., 2023).

I am a white, cisgender, straight, English-speaking, middle-class woman without an identified disability. My racial and social positioning have afforded me unearned advantages in educational and professional spaces—advantages I did not always recognize. As a former special educator and now a researcher studying BSETs' sense of collegial belonging, I am acutely aware that I am entering a research terrain shaped by histories of exclusion, displacement, and erasure—histories from which I have benefited.

For example, I believe the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*—and the mass dismissal of Black educators during desegregation—has had lasting consequences on how schools function and who is made to feel they belong within them. I am invested in this research because I see how contemporary efforts to recruit teachers of color often fail to be accompanied by meaningful commitments from white educators like myself to examine how our behaviors, assumptions, and silences may contribute to exclusionary environments. In the past, I may have interpreted collegial harmony or open communication with teachers of color as a sign of mutual belonging—without recognizing that we had never explicitly discussed how they experienced belonging within the team. My reflections on those missed opportunities are central to my desire to engage in this research with more intentionality and care.

I approach this study with the belief that BSETs are experts in identifying the types of relationships that foster their professional well-being and sense of belonging. I do not see my role as translating or validating that knowledge, but rather as creating space to elevate it, while

being mindful of how my presence as a white researcher will influence the research. To that end, I chose methods that allow participants to share stories anonymously and asynchronously through story completion, followed by optional interviews for those who felt comfortable participating in them. These methodological decisions were informed by a desire to reduce power imbalances and potential discomfort that may arise when discussing racially charged dynamics with a white researcher.

I also chose to conduct RTA not despite my positionality, but because of it. I view reflexivity not as a disclaimer, but as a methodological responsibility. I have documented and shared my evolving interpretations throughout the analysis process, holding myself accountable to the participants, my advisor, and the communities I hope this research serves. In doing so, I align with scholars like Boveda and Annamma (2023), who call for white researchers to be vigilant about the ways our knowledge-making practices can inadvertently perpetuate harm.

This study does not aim to generate a list of prescriptive practices, but to foreground BSETs' experiences as a lens for reimagining professional relationships in ways that affirm, sustain, and dignify their roles within schools. I acknowledge the limitations of my perspective and the interpretive lens through which I engage this work. However, I also hold the conviction that white educators must take greater responsibility in co-creating environments where all educators—particularly those who have historically been marginalized—can experience genuine belonging.

Overview of Story Completion

Story completion is situated within the broader landscape of narrative inquiry, a field grounded in the recognition that people are "storied beings" whose experiences and identities are shaped, conveyed, and understood through stories (O'Toole, 2018). Narrative methods, while

diverse, share a common commitment to using stories as a window into human experience (Andrews et al., 2008). Story completion offers a distinctive approach within this field by inviting participants to complete a researcher-provided story stem in their own words (Clarke et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

A story stem is a brief, deliberately constructed narrative prompt that places participants within a partially described scenario, inviting them to imagine what might happen next. These prompts are designed to be open-ended yet contextually grounded, providing just enough detail to orient participants while leaving space for their own meaning-making and narrative construction (Clarke et al., 2017; Braun et al., 2022). Through their responses, participants draw upon personal experiences, cultural understandings, and social discourses to shape the direction of the story, offering insight into the ways they make sense of the world (Wallin et al., 2019). Careful design of the story stem is crucial, as elements such as wording, framing, and level of specificity can subtly guide the types of responses elicited (Eskola, 1998, as cited in Wallin et al., 2019). Typically, stems are kept short—often no more than a few sentences—to avoid overcomplicating the prompt and to encourage imaginative engagement without overwhelming participants (Wallin et al., 2019). The focus on crafting compelling story stems reflects the method's evolution toward eliciting diverse and situated narratives, a shift that becomes clearer when considering its early development.

The use of incomplete narratives to elicit participant responses has a long-standing history in psychological research, initially developed as a projective method within psychoanalytic and developmental frameworks (Rabin, 2001). In its early applications, story completion sought to uncover hidden psychological meanings within participants' narratives, often focusing on individual pathology. However, influenced by social constructionist and

post-structuralist theories, contemporary researchers have reoriented the method to explore the social and cultural dimensions of meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Rather than searching for personal psychological insights, today's story completion studies examine how participants draw from the narrative resources of their social worlds to construct stories, illuminating shared discourses and cultural understandings (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Smith, 2019).

Although story completion remains relatively underutilized in educational research (Clarke et al., 2017), it has demonstrated significant potential for methodological innovation, particularly in studies of sensitive or underexplored topics (Clarke et al., 2017; Gravett, 2019). The method has been widely used in fields such as psychology and feminist research to examine issues where participants may feel constrained in more direct data collection settings, including gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships (Clarke et al., 2017). Studies have explored themes such as infidelity (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Schnarre & Adam, 2017), sexual decision-making (Beres et al., 2018; Shah-Beckley et al., 2020), perceptions of sexual aggression (Livingston & Testa, 2000), and attitudes toward disability in romantic contexts (Hunt et al., 2018), illustrating the method's capacity to surface the cultural discourses participants draw upon to navigate socially charged experiences.

Within educational research, Gravett and Winstone (2019) provide a notable example of how story completion can be meaningfully integrated with follow-up interviews. Their study, which explored students' transitions into higher education, used story completion to surface participants' assumptions and discourses, and then employed semi-structured interviews not only to deepen exploration of these themes but also to invite participants to reflect on their experience of writing the story and to compare their own lived experiences with the fictional narratives they

had constructed. This approach provided both methodological reflection and personal exploration, offering what the authors described as a "fine-grained qualitative understanding of student practices" (Gourlay, 2015, p. 409, as cited in Gravett & Winstone, 2019). In my study, I adopted a similar multi-layered design. Participants first engaged in the story completion task, which served as both a tool to encourage reflection and a foundation for the subsequent interviews. Drawing upon their initial narratives, I then developed a semi-structured interview protocol that invited participants to expand upon or contrast their written stories with their lived experiences of collegial belonging. Informed by Mueller's (2019) approach to episodic narrative interviewing, the protocol was designed to elicit both concrete stories and reflective insights, allowing participants to illustrate specific episodes of collegial interaction while also exploring broader meanings. This sequencing not only deepened the data collected but also provided participants with an opportunity to engage thoughtfully with the topic before the interview conversation began.

Insights from related scenario-based methods, such as the Method of Empathy-Based Stories (MEBS), further informed my approach. Like story completion, MEBS prompts participants to engage with hypothetical yet plausible scenarios, drawing on both lived experience and imaginative projection to make sense of the situations presented (Wallin et al., 2019). MEBS has been successfully applied within education to explore vocational students' perceptions of teacher authority (Koski-Heikkinen et al., 2014; Särkelä & Suoranta, 2020), peer perceptions of classroom inclusion for students with disabilities (Teräväinen, 2011), and teachers' experiences of belonging within co-teaching relationships (Pesonen et al., 2021). These applications highlight the method's utility in illuminating participants' understandings of relational and contextual dynamics, which aligns with my study's focus on the collegial

experiences of BSETs. Drawing from both the story completion literature and MEBS, my study employed hypothetical scenarios to elicit culturally situated perspectives, creating space for participants to explore both the realities and possibilities of fostering belonging in their professional lives.

Epistemological Stance

This study is grounded in a qualitative approach shaped by a social constructivist epistemology. From this perspective, realities are understood as socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Denicolo & Bradley-Cole, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2000). The aim of constructivist research is not to uncover singular truths, but to explore how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences within specific social contexts. In this study, that includes examining how BSETs make sense of collegial belonging in their professional lives.

Rather than seeking generalizable or objective findings, this approach emphasizes depth, complexity, and contextual understanding. All participant narratives—regardless of frequency or emphasis—were treated as meaningful insights into the relational and institutional conditions that shape belonging (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The goal was not to determine what belonging "is" in a universal sense, but to explore how it is experienced, imagined, and described by those who must navigate professional relationships within varied educational contexts.

This epistemological stance aligns with both the story completion method and RTA used in this study. Story completion enabled participants to construct hypothetical yet grounded narratives, drawing from both lived experience and cultural knowledge to respond to an open-ended prompt about collegial relationships. While some participants' stories reflected

experiences in predominantly white schools, the method was not designed to elicit commentary on whiteness specifically. Instead, it invited participants to articulate what belonging required in collaborative spaces—whether aspirational or reflective of real encounters.

RTA supported this constructivist orientation by treating meaning as something actively produced through the researcher's interpretation, rather than passively found in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Themes were developed through a recursive, reflective process that acknowledged the influence of my positionality and the theoretical lenses I brought to the work. Together, these methods offered a flexible yet rigorous approach to examining how BSETs describe, imagine, and assess the relational conditions under which collegial belonging is possible.

Rationale for Methodological Approach

Recognizing the underexplored and potentially sensitive nature of BSETs' experiences of collegial belonging, I selected story completion as the primary method for this study, drawing inspiration from both the story completion literature and MEBS. Story completion offered participants the privacy and flexibility to engage with the prompt on their terms, enabling thoughtful, unhurried reflection on experiences that may carry emotional weight. In designing the study, I was guided by MEBS's emphasis on crafting prompts that evoke rich, culturally situated narratives while respecting participants' autonomy. I intended to foster a research space where participants could safely explore both their lived realities and imagined possibilities for collegial connection and belonging.

In addition to selecting story completion as the initial data collection method, I employed RTA to analyze participants' narratives. RTA aligned well with both the goals of the study and my constructivist epistemological stance, as it offers a flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022;

Terry et al., 2017). Rather than viewing themes as pre-existing entities waiting to be discovered, RTA treats meaning as actively constructed through the researcher's interpretive engagement with the data. This was particularly important for a study focused on belonging, which is not a static or easily defined construct, but one that is continually shaped through social interaction and institutional context. The flexibility of RTA allowed me to work both inductively and deductively, attending to what participants emphasized while also situating their narratives within broader discourses on race, professional identity, and varying frameworks of belonging.

Insights from Braun et al. (2021) on the use of online qualitative surveys further supported my methodological choices. They argue that self-administered, open-ended surveys can yield rich, nuanced data, particularly when exploring complex or sensitive topics, because they allow participants to control the timing, setting, and pace of their engagement. The online format can reduce social pressures associated with face-to-face data collection, providing a sense of psychological safety that may encourage participants to share more openly. This consideration was especially relevant given the racialized dynamics of the research topic and my positionality as a white researcher. Using Qualtrics to distribute the story stem allowed participants to respond privately and at their convenience, enhancing both accessibility and comfort.

Consistent with a social constructionist orientation, I approached story completion not as a means to uncover hidden truths but as an opportunity to explore the discourses that participants drew upon when imagining collegial interactions and belonging. From this perspective, the interest lies less in whether a story reflects real-life events and more in how it reflects the cultural logics, professional norms, and relational assumptions that shape how participants make sense of their experiences (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Walsh & Malson, 2010). This orientation also shaped my approach to the analysis. Rather than coding for themes that "exist"

in the data as objective truths, I treated participants' responses as partial and situated stories—shaped by their contexts, informed by their professional and cultural knowledge, and mediated through the prompts themselves. Reflexive thematic analysis was a natural fit here, as it allowed me to stay attuned to the discursive patterns participants mobilized while also encouraging ongoing reflection on how my perspectives shaped the analytic process.

Furthermore, participants' story completion responses informed the development of the semi-structured interview protocol, allowing for a more responsive and layered exploration of themes raised in their narratives. This sequencing not only deepened the data collected but also provided participants with an opportunity to engage thoughtfully with the topic before the interview conversation began. Taken together, my methodological approach reflects a deliberate layering of narrative-based techniques, anchored by RTA as a framework for interpretation. By treating participants' stories as constructed and situated, this analytic approach enabled me to surface the nuanced and relational dimensions of collegial belonging as experienced by Black special educators.

Story Stem Development and Piloting

The development of the story stem was an intentional and iterative process, grounded in both methodological literature and collaborative feedback. Scholars caution that the clarity and relevance of the stem are critical to eliciting meaningful responses (Clarke et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Wallin et al., 2019). To ensure this, I crafted a single, open-ended stem that invited participants to reflect on collegial relationships and experiences of belonging within their work environments (see Phase 1).

Recognizing the importance of cultural relevance, I piloted the stem with two BSETs and members of my research team. The pilot teachers provided valuable feedback, particularly

regarding the clarity of the prompt and its resonance with their lived realities. This feedback informed refinements to the wording of the stem and the accompanying instructions, enhancing accessibility and ensuring the prompt invited a range of perspectives aligned with the study's aims. Following recommendations from Wallin et al. (2019), I kept the stem concise to avoid participant disorientation while still allowing flexibility for diverse narrative responses.

Recruitment

Recruitment for this study took place through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. I began recruitment by directly emailing the study flyer (see Appendix B) to potential participants whom I knew through my experiences as a former special educator and my current role in higher education. The flyer contained a link to a questionnaire (see Appendix C), which prospective participants completed to determine eligibility and provide demographic and professional context. To be eligible, participants needed to be currently licensed and employed as special education teachers in PK–12 schools in the United States. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants who completed the story prompt received a $20 gift card as compensation. Those who completed a follow-up interview received an additional $20 gift card.

Participants who met the inclusion criteria were also invited to share information about the study within their networks, thereby extending the recruitment reach through snowball sampling. Additionally, I shared the flyer with individuals in my personal and professional networks, encouraging them to circulate the information among colleagues who might be eligible or connected to potential participants. This approach was chosen to expand outreach beyond my immediate professional circles while maintaining relevance to the study population.

To further increase visibility and accessibility, I leveraged social media platforms, specifically Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), to distribute the study flyer. These platforms

were selected strategically, as research indicates that Black adults in the United States are proportionally more likely to use both Facebook and X compared to other racial groups (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Furthermore, Facebook has emerged as one of the most prevalent platforms for research recruitment, particularly given its features that support posting in public groups and the ease of sharing posts among networks (Sledzieski et al., 2023). This approach created opportunities for a broader reach. It allowed others, such as fellow researchers or educators, to act as digital intermediaries, effectively serving as an online extension of the snowball sampling method. All recruitment procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Participants

Seventeen special education teachers participated in the first phase of the study (see Table 2). This sample size aligns with existing recommendations for story-based methods such as MEBS, which suggests that 15–20 responses are sufficient to generate rich, varied narratives (Wallin et al., 2019), as well as with comparable educational research using story completion, such as Gravett and Winstone's (2019) study, which engaged 16 participants in the story completion task. Consistent with guidance for depth-oriented qualitative research (Braun et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2017), this sample provided a range of perspectives while allowing for nuanced thematic exploration.

Of the 17 participants, 14 identified as female, two as male, and one selected "other." Participants' teaching experience ranged from one to 38 years ($M = 8.82$), and their ages ranged from their twenties to early sixties ($M = 41.25$). Three participants self-identified as having a disability. When describing their racial identities, 12 participants identified as Black. Additional self-descriptions included African American (1), Afro-Caribbean (1), and bi-racial identities,

including Black and bi-racial (3). These varied self-descriptions reflect the diversity of how participants personally understood and identified themselves racially.

Participants taught across a range of grade levels and instructional placements. Four described teaching at the elementary level, seven at the middle school level, and five at the high school level, with some participants teaching across multiple grade bands (e.g., elementary and middle or middle and high school). Instructional roles included inclusive settings, resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, cross-categorical placements, and specialized transition services. Eight participants reported teaching across multiple service delivery models (e.g., inclusive and resource), five taught primarily in self-contained settings, and two taught exclusively in inclusive classrooms.

Descriptions of school racial diversity varied across participants. Seven participants characterized their schools as having limited diversity, often describing general education and leadership positions as predominantly held by white individuals. Five participants described somewhat to highly diverse environments, often noting racial diversity among teaching staff or administrative teams. Another five participants emphasized that while staff of color were present, they were most often employed in non-teaching roles, such as paraprofessionals, behavioral specialists, or support personnel. Across various contexts, participants emphasized that even in schools with more diverse staffing overall, Black educators remained underrepresented in both classroom teaching and administrative leadership roles.

Interview Participants

Following the story completion task, participants were invited to participate in a follow-up, semi-structured interview to further explore their experiences of collegial belonging. Five participants volunteered for interviews. To protect anonymity and preserve the narrative

integrity of the story completion data, no demographic identifiers (such as age, disability status, or years of experience) were formally collected during interviews. However, participants were asked to share their pronouns at the start of each conversation, which provided some insight into gender identity: four interviewees were Black women special educators, and one was a Black man.

Through the interviews, participants shared details about their teaching contexts. The male participant taught at the high school level, working in both co-taught classes and resource settings with students with and without disabilities. Among the four women, two also taught in high schools, both in self-contained special education classrooms. One participant worked in a middle school self-contained setting, while the other taught at the elementary level across multiple service delivery models, including push-in and pull-out support. These varied contexts added nuance to participants' perspectives and helped illuminate how instructional roles, grade levels, and the degree of integration within general education environments shape collegial belonging.

Introducing the Research Process to Participants

Before participants were invited to complete the story completion task, they were asked to complete an initial eligibility questionnaire (see Appendix C). The purpose of this questionnaire was twofold: first, to confirm that participants met the study's inclusion criteria as BSETs currently employed in PK–12 schools; and second, to ensure that participants had a clear understanding of the study's focus and what their participation would involve. In addition to basic demographic questions—such as how participants identified their racial identity and their current teaching license—the questionnaire provided an overview of the story completion activity. It described the nature of the hypothetical prompt, clarified that there would be no time

limits for completion, and explained that participants would be asked to reflect on collegial relationships and belonging in their professional lives.

The onboarding process was designed intentionally to prioritize clarity and participant autonomy, in line with best practices in story completion research that emphasize the importance of clear guidance for participants (Clarke et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022). By providing detailed explanations upfront, the eligibility questionnaire not only served as a screening tool but also functioned as an initial point of engagement, helping participants make an informed decision about their involvement in the study. Additionally, I incorporated two checkpoints within the Qualtrics survey itself, prompting participants to confirm their understanding or seek clarification before proceeding. These strategies reflected ethical commitments to fostering participant agency and ensuring that participants felt well-supported and confident in their engagement with the research (Lenette et al., 2022). This thoughtful introduction to the research process laid the foundation for meaningful participant engagement in the study's subsequent phases.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a two-phase design, consisting of a story completion survey followed by semi-structured interviews. A constructivist epistemology guided the approach, drawing on RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to explore how BSETs make sense of collegial belonging. My analytic process was guided by abductive reasoning, which involved moving iteratively between the data and existing literature to develop plausible and theoretically informed interpretations.This approach, rooted in the work of Tavory and Timmermans (2014), allowed me to generate insights by exploring surprising or compelling patterns in the data and connecting them to broader theoretical constructs. Abduction, as Rinehart (2021) emphasizes,

supports a recursive dialogue between empirical observation and conceptual framing—making it especially suited to studies that aim to surface complexity rather than confirm existing hypotheses. I began with inductive, first-cycle coding grounded in participants' language, using descriptive and in vivo codes to capture their experiences (Saldaña, 2021). As patterns emerged, I introduced theoretical concepts during second-cycle coding to deepen interpretation and situate the findings within ongoing scholarly conversations. This abductive strategy enabled me to remain open to the unexpected while anchoring the analysis in the broader social and cultural discourses shaping participants' experiences.

Phase 1: Story Completion

Once participants' eligibility was confirmed, they were emailed an anonymous Qualtrics link to complete the story completion task (see Appendix D). Data collection ceased after eight weeks, and all responses were submitted during Fall 2024 and collected entirely through the Qualtrics platform. They were presented with the following story stem:

> Imagine you are scrolling through special educator job postings. Something about this school catches your attention. They say all the right things: "We prioritize inclusion, collaborative teaching practices, and strive to make every teacher and student feel valued and respected for their diverse identities." The words leap off the screen, and you can't help but wonder, What does that really look like in practice?
>
> Reflecting on your identities and experiences, if you could tell the school exactly what you need to feel valued in a collaborative setting, what would you ask for? What specific actions or supports from your colleagues and leadership would you say are necessary for your voice to be heard, your expertise to be respected, and for you to feel like you truly belong in these collaborative spaces?

Reminders to complete the survey were sent out at weekly intervals on three occasions. Before beginning the story completion task, participants entered their authentication information (i.e., the email address they provided in the eligibility questionnaire) to verify their eligibility for the study and were then prompted to provide informed consent. The same directions they had reviewed in the eligibility questionnaire were presented again, stating that they could take as much time as needed to formulate their responses and that the survey platform required a minimum of ten lines of text to submit. Participants were encouraged to approach the prompt in whatever format felt most natural to them, whether through full narrative writing or bullet points, and to draw on their lived experiences, professional insights, or imaginative projections. This structure aimed to support participant agency while ensuring adequate depth for analysis. After completing the story task, participants were asked to provide additional background information that helped situate the data within the broader racial and professional contexts they navigated. At the end of the survey, participants were provided with a separate, unlinked Qualtrics form where they could enter their email address to receive their digital gift card. This decoupling ensured that no identifying information, such as email addresses, was stored alongside their story completion responses.

The story completion tasks ($N = 17$) generated responses that ranged in length from 33 to 394 words, with an average response length of 143 words ($SD = 102$). This variation is consistent with the broader MEBS literature, which emphasizes that participant stories typically fall along a continuum from brief, highly focused accounts to more elaborate and exploratory narratives (Gravett, 2019; Clarke et al., 2017). MEBS scholarship has also noted that 15–20 responses per frame story are generally sufficient for meaningful analysis and that even smaller datasets can produce rich and analytically significant material (Wallin et al., 2019). In this study,

the 17 responses provided both breadth and depth of narrative content, offering a robust foundation for reflexive thematic analysis. While responses varied in length, the analysis prioritized thematic significance rather than word quantity, ensuring that both shorter and longer stories were valued equally in shaping the findings.

Phase 2: Story Completion Analysis & Interview Protocol

Familiarisation began during data collection, as I read participants' responses in real time on Qualtrics as they were submitted. This early engagement helped me begin noticing patterns, tensions, and points of curiosity. Once all submissions were complete, I continued this process by rereading each story multiple times—an approach aligned with the first phase of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). My initial coding took an inductive orientation, allowing the data to shape the early interpretive process. However, as Braun and Clarke (2022) argue, no analysis is ever purely inductive. My familiarity with literature on teacher belonging and professional collaboration inevitably shaped what I noticed and how I made sense of it. In this way, my approach was abductive—characterized by a recursive dialogue between the data, the conceptual frameworks I brought to it, and the questions that arose along the way.

I began coding at the semantic level, working line by line in Dedoose and staying closely grounded in participants' language. As my analysis deepened, I also engaged with latent meanings, exploring the discourses and assumptions underpinning what was said (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, a segment coded semantically as "opportunity to add to the discussion" was also coded latently as "access to decision-making spaces," drawing on theoretical frameworks related to the concept of belonging.

Throughout this process, I engaged in reflexive journaling, which served as both an analytical companion and a space for personal and theoretical reflection. My entries ranged from

documenting patterns and insights to critically examining my assumptions about collegiality and belonging. I often posed open-ended questions about recurring language or ideas in the data—for example, I found myself asking, *"What does respect in the workplace really mean?*" *Do we equate respect with "staying in our lane"? And is this view racialized—do predominantly white work environments frame silence and lack of questioning as respectful, rather than as disengagement or erasure?* These questions prompted me to remain attentive to how social norms may be constructed and experienced differently across racial lines. I also journaled about emerging connections to theories of belonging, such as how access to shared professional space—whether through opportunities for feedback, moments of collaboration, or being invited into pedagogical dialogue—surfaced repeatedly as a condition of collegial connection. These reflections helped shape both the interpretive direction of my coding and the broader conceptual framing of my themes.

The initial round of coding generated over 150 unique codes. I then proceeded with a process of clustering and refining, grouping codes that shared a similar affective tone, function, or conceptual alignment. This process yielded ten early thematic groupings, which I reviewed and revised through continued memoing and re-reading. Ultimately, these were distilled into three overarching themes that capture the nuanced ways collegial interactions foster a sense of belonging among BSETs. These themes then directly informed the development of my semi-structured interview protocol, which was used to explore further the narratives generated in the story completion task.

Phase 3: Semi-structured Interviews

After analyzing the story completion responses and identifying initial themes, I invited participants to engage in a follow-up semi-structured interview to further reflect on and respond

to the preliminary findings. In early February 2025, participants who had completed the initial survey were contacted via email and invited to participate in a 45–60-minute Zoom interview. The invitation explained the purpose of the follow-up conversation—to examine the themes that had emerged from their collective responses and to discuss how those themes resonated with their personal experiences. Participants were offered a $20 gift card for their time.

Five participants elected to participate in these interviews, which were conducted virtually over Zoom between mid-February and early March. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 75 minutes. Before beginning each interview, I reviewed the consent form, which participants had already signed during the initial story completion phase and which indicated the possibility of being contacted for follow-up interviews. Participants were reminded that the conversation would be recorded for research purposes and were invited to ask any questions before proceeding. To support transparency and comfort, each participant was offered the opportunity to choose a pseudonym; one participant did so (“Lewis”), and I assigned pseudonyms for the remaining interviewees. Researcher-assigned names were selected from a pre-generated list of common, non–race-coded U.S. given names while maintaining participants’ self-described gender. Racial identity is made explicit in the narrative rather than inferred from names, and identifying details were limited to preserve confidentiality.

Prior to the interview, each participant received a confirmation email that included the Zoom link and a digital presentation outlining the interview structure, as well as the three preliminary themes (see Appendix E). These themes, developed from their collective story completion responses, indicated that BSETs felt a greater sense of belonging when colleagues and leaders: (1) actively advocated for and implemented inclusive practices, (2) created

psychological safety by valuing their expertise and lived experiences, and (3) acknowledged systemic barriers and worked collaboratively to dismantle them.

The interview protocol was designed to be reflective and conversational. It began with open-ended questions about participants' professional journeys and their current sense of belonging. The core of the interview invited their responses to the preliminary themes—whether these resonated with, challenged, or expanded their own experiences. Follow-up prompts encouraged elaboration and storytelling. Each interview concluded with a brief reflective segment in which participants could share what, if anything, surprised them, felt missing, or deserved further discussion. After each interview was completed, the recording was transcribed, and I reviewed the transcript alongside the audio to ensure accuracy. Once verified, I uploaded the transcript into Dedoose, where I began coding and integrating it into the broader data analysis process.

Phase 4: Refining Themes and AI Support

Synthesizing Data Across Phases. The final phase of analysis involved a comprehensive and integrative engagement with the full dataset, bringing together the imaginative and idealized accounts from the story completion responses with the lived experiences participants shared in interviews. This recursive process enabled me to deepen and refine my understanding of the conditions under which BSETs experience a sense of collegial belonging.

I returned to the complete set of story completion data and interview transcripts, focusing on identifying which patterns carried the most significance across participants' accounts and how these intersected with the conceptual frameworks outlined in my literature review. While the story completion responses often offered aspirational visions—what participants wished their collegial environments would be—the interviews grounded these hopes in real experiences of

both disconnection and connection. Attending to this tension helped me clarify how belonging was both longed for and, at times, meaningfully achieved, and how collegial interactions played a central role in that process.

Refining Themes through Iterative Analysis and AI Support. During this phase, I reexamined and reorganized the initial themes I had generated after Phase 2. This included renaming, splitting, and combining themes in ways that better reflected participants' priorities and the theoretical dimensions of belonging. For instance, the theme initially titled "psychological safety" was reframed to better align with Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework of belonging, specifically the dimensions of perceived belonging and the development of competencies. This shift enabled me to understand better how participants not only wanted to feel safe but also sought to be seen, supported, and challenged as professionals with valuable knowledge and skills.

In addition to traditional qualitative methods, I also used ChatGPT to support the analytic process, specifically to help identify additional statements across the dataset that corresponded with the themes I was developing. For example, I prompted the model to surface excerpts related to how Black special educators and students with disabilities are perceived by colleagues, drawing from both story completion and interview transcripts. My use of AI was guided by the ethical recommendations outlined in *Qualitative Data Analysis with ChatGPT and QualCoder: A Step-by-Step Guide to AI-Powered Coding and Thematic Analysis* (Muhammad, 2024). I redacted all participant names and identifiable information from the transcripts before inputting any data and refined my prompts iteratively to encourage interpretive breadth and reduce bias in AI responses.

Importantly, I did not use ChatGPT to generate themes or conduct independent analysis; instead, I used it as a tool to augment my interpretive work. The goal was not to replace human insight but to deepen engagement with the data by helping me locate patterns that might otherwise remain obscured. As Muhammad (2024) explains, "When used responsibly, AI can serve as a powerful partner in enhancing the reliability and credibility of qualitative research, helping researchers navigate complex datasets while preserving the richness of human insight" (p. 183). This approach aligned with my commitment to rigor, transparency, and reflexivity—positioning AI not as a shortcut, but as one of many tools in a layered, ethically grounded analytic process.

As part of the fifth phase of RTA (i.e., refining, defining, and naming themes) I worked to clarify the conceptual boundaries of each theme and ensure that, collectively, they told a coherent story about how collegial belonging is fostered for BSETs. This stage required deep reflection, extensive memo writing, reevaluation of the conceptual belonging framework I had generated, and analytical dialogue with the data. I drew closely from participants' words, selecting illustrative excerpts from both phases of data collection to ground the themes in participants' voices and experiences.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

I approached trustworthiness in this study by focusing on transparency, reflexivity, and depth of analysis. Instead of aiming for objectivity or replication, I recognized that my interpretations were shaped by who I am—my background, values, and experiences—as well as the broader context of the research. While early frameworks in special education emphasized criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Brantlinger et al., 2005), more recent scholarship encourages researchers to align trustworthiness strategies with

the purpose, paradigm, and ethical commitments of the study itself (Banks et al., 2023; Leko et al., 2021).

One way I supported credibility was by layering methods: participants first responded to a story completion prompt and were then invited to take part in interviews. The interview questions were shaped by what participants shared in their stories, which allowed for deeper reflection and more meaningful conversations (Gravett & Winstone, 2019). I also incorporated member checking when inviting participants to optional interviews by sharing preliminary themes and asking whether they resonated with their experiences or if any aspects were overlooked or misrepresented.

Additionally, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the process, writing about what I noticed in the data, the questions I had, and how my assumptions about belonging and collaboration were being challenged along the way. In addition to individual reflexivity, I engaged in peer debriefing to enhance analytic clarity and accountability. I met regularly with my advisor to discuss coding decisions, emerging patterns, and the conceptual framing of themes. These conversations served as a space to articulate my reasoning, receive feedback, and critically reflect on my interpretations, particularly around how my own positionality may be shaping meaning-making. This collaborative process helped ensure that my analysis remained grounded in participants' experiences while also being theoretically coherent.

To support consistency, I reviewed all transcripts for accuracy and used Dedoose to manage and organize my codes and memos. Rather than aiming for reliability in the traditional sense, I prioritized transparency and coherence in my decision-making, remaining grounded in my research questions and analytic values (Banks et al., 2023;). My goal was to surface themes

that felt rich and resonant, not to make generalizations, but to center the complex experiences of BSETs in ways that felt honest, thoughtful, and grounded in their words.

Chapter 4: Findings

The central question guiding this study was: How are Black special education teachers' sense of belonging shaped by interactions with colleagues? Participants answered this question not only by naming the interactions and conditions that supported their inclusion, but also by revealing how the absence of those conditions made belonging elusive. For the BSETs in this study—many of whom worked in predominantly white schools—belonging was not something guaranteed. It often depended on supportive colleagues, environments, and interactions that affirmed their presence, expertise, and contributions.

Drawing on both story completion responses and semi-structured interviews, the findings present my interpretation of how participants navigated the racialized dynamics of their work environments, their experiences of belonging and exclusion, and the conditions that made collegial belonging feel possible. The two methods provided distinct yet complementary insights: story completion responses mainly captured aspirational or generalized scenarios, while interviews offered deeper accounts of lived experiences. To distinguish between data sources, the five interview participants—Lewis (participant-selected pseudonym) and Alexis, Morgan, Riley, and Taylor (researcher-assigned, non–race-coded pseudonyms)—are used throughout. Quotes without attribution are from story completion responses.Together, these narratives offer a nuanced and multi-layered understanding of belonging as both an individual and institutional phenomenon.

Importantly, when participants referred to their colleagues, they were most often describing general education teachers and administrators. Only two interview participants discussed their relationships with other special educators or paraprofessionals. This context matters for interpreting the findings: the experiences described here largely reflect BSETs'

interactions in cross-role collaborations, rather than exclusively within special education departments. Furthermore, because the story stem explicitly asked participants to describe what they needed from their colleagues, the findings should be understood as describing the beliefs and character traits they needed others to hold, rather than the self-perceptions or professional skills of BSETs themselves.

In the sections that follow, I situate participants' accounts within the broader racial and professional contexts they navigated. I then present three interrelated themes: (1) how perceptions shaped experiences of inclusion or marginalization, (2) the competencies and relational practices that built or strained collegial belonging, and (3) the opportunities BSETs had—or lacked—to connect, grow, collaborate, and lead (see Table 4 for an overview of the themes). Together, these findings offer an interpretive account of how interactions with colleagues shaped participants' sense of collegial belonging, and what that belonging entails, resists, and enables.

Situating Belonging Within Racialized School Contexts

Before presenting the thematic findings of this study, it is important to situate participants' experiences within the racialized realities of their professional environments. As stated, the majority of BSETs in this study taught in predominantly white schools, and when asked how they believed their racial identity impacted their sense of belonging, their responses made clear that their sense of inclusion could not be disentangled from the racial dynamics of their schools. Accordingly, belonging did not feel like a given—it was something to be negotiated, navigated, and, at times, withheld.

For instance, 15 of the 17 participants (88.2%) described experiences of marginalization, hypervisibility, or isolation related to their racial identity. Some were the only Black educators in

their building or department; others spoke about the compounded experience of being both a special educator and a Black professional—two roles that, when combined, made it harder for them to be seen as legitimate in spaces shaped by whiteness and ableism. As one participant explained, “As a special education teacher, I often find myself navigating both my racial identity and my professional role, which can sometimes feel isolating.” Another described feeling like the “only orange in a basket of apples.”

These dynamics were not solely interpersonal but also systemic. Participants described having their assertiveness misinterpreted as aggression, their contributions overlooked unless validated by white colleagues, and their professional expertise questioned. One educator reflected, “Teachers who call themselves social justice warriors or ‘woke’ are the same ones who have called me angry or intimidating. It is confusing and hypocritical.” The emotional labor of managing others’ perceptions, while advocating for students, asserting professional expertise, and preserving their own well-being, was a recurring thought.

At the same time, several participants highlighted moments of affirmation, particularly in schools with more racially diverse staff or inclusive leadership. These accounts reveal that racial identity did not solely function as a barrier; it could also be a source of connection, especially when teachers saw themselves reflected in their students or found allies among colleagues. As one participant noted, “I feel that it helps me connect better with students of color and that they can relate to me better than they can to a white staff member.”

These accounts of racialized working conditions are not background noise to the study’s central inquiry—they are the context in which the question takes shape. They illustrate that belonging is not only created through affirming relationships, but through active opposition to the systems, behaviors, and assumptions that seek to exclude or devalue.

Perceptions: Navigating Inclusion and Marginalization

Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework for belonging identifies perceptions of belonging as one of four interrelated components that shape individuals' experiences of inclusion within social systems. These perceptions—defined as individuals' subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their social experiences—play a central role in signaling whether one belongs. Perceptions are not formed in isolation; they are shaped through interactions, institutional cues, and histories of inclusion or exclusion. For BSETs', affirming perceptions from colleagues—being seen as capable, knowledgeable, and essential—were foundational to their sense of collegial belonging. Louie et al.'s (2022) theory of radical belonging emphasizes that perceptions are never neutral. They are shaped by racialized assumptions and institutional norms that determine whose ways of being, knowing, and leading are deemed acceptable. In their work at Eastwood, Louie and colleagues illustrate how policies (e.g., hallway silence rules) reproduced racialized control and exclusion when grounded in assumptions about students' home lives or behaviors. Similarly, in this study, BSETs encountered perceptions that limited their professional legitimacy, such as being seen primarily as behavioral managers or as peripheral support rather than instructional leaders. By positioning BSETs as ancillary rather than central to instructional work, these perceptions reinforced structural barriers to full professional inclusion. Page et al. (2021) offer an additional lens, arguing that belonging is deeply spatial: it is shaped by who is granted access to relational, pedagogical, and material spaces, and how they are positioned within them. Importantly, institutional and interpersonal perceptions determine who is invited in, whose expertise is recognized, and who is left at the margins.

Taken together, these findings affirm what theories of belonging make clear: perceptions and assumptions—about teachers, students, and inclusion itself—are central to how collegial

belonging is constructed or denied. The following subthemes explore this dynamic through three interconnected lenses: (1) how BSETs were perceived by colleagues, (2) how students with disabilities were perceived, and (3) how responsibility for inclusion was understood.

Perceptions of BSETs: Professional Legitimacy or Merely Support

Participants described feeling included when colleagues acted in ways that showed they trusted their depth of knowledge—not just about special education services, but also about students, families, and the broader school context. One teacher explained that "having enough trust and faith in me to perform to the best of my ability" was foundational to collegial belonging. For many, this trust was demonstrated when their expertise was seen as essential to school decision-making rather than supplementary. As one participant explained, "I need to be a part of all discussions…team discussions with grade level colleagues, planning discussions with administrators, co-teaching discussions…My expertise in the areas of special education services and student development needs to be valued." Another echoed this point, noting that "being included in key decision-making processes... helps me feel like a valued member of the team and contribute my best work." A third added that "seeking my advice on relevant issues, asking for my input on decisions that impact these students [students with disabilities], and valuing my suggestions would show respect for my contributions."

What participants sought, however, was not casual or symbolic inclusion but intentional engagement. One emphasized, "This means ensuring that diverse voices, like mine, are intentionally included in discussions." Another pushed further, insisting, "My identity and my professional background should be recognized as assets in shaping policies and practices that benefit all students." For Lewis, such recognition occasionally took the form of colleagues deferring to his instructional authority: "They say, 'Do whatever you want to do with [the

assignments]. Modify, accommodations, change it, eliminate questions; do what you got to do.'" These moments of affirmation reflected more than procedural coordination; they conveyed professional respect and trust in his judgment.

Still, participants made clear that these affirming gestures were the exception, not the rule. Many described being viewed as less credible than their general education peers. "I do not feel that my role is as valued as a core content teacher's role," one participant reflected. "Most core content teachers see us as behavioral support." Another explained the frustration of being miscast as subordinate: "There should be an understanding that we [content teacher and special educators] are both teachers and adults and one person is not just a support person." For some, the dismissal of their expertise was compounded by racialized and gendered expectations. They noted that their communication, particularly when advocating for students, was often interpreted as aggressive rather than professional. As one put it, "If the conversation shifts to best practices or even evidence-based best practices, my opinion is not validated." Similarly, Lewis described how the invisibility of some aspects of his role fueled misconceptions: "A lot of my coworkers sometimes assume that… we are just sitting in our office doing nothing, diddling our thumbs." Together, these accounts illustrate how BSETs' credibility was frequently undermined—not because of a lack of knowledge or effort, but because entrenched perceptions of race, role, and authority constrained how their expertise was recognized.

Perceptions of Students: Affirmation and Bias

Belonging was also shaped by how colleagues perceived students with disabilities—particularly Black students with disabilities. For BSETs, these perceptions were never just about student behavior or ability; they revealed more profound insights about colleagues' beliefs, values, and willingness to confront racism and ableism. Participants

emphasized that how colleagues viewed students reflected their broader commitments to inclusion, not just in principle, but in practice.

When colleagues approached students with curiosity, care, and high expectations, BSETs recognized these actions as signs of shared purpose—not only to support student success, but to build schools rooted in dignity and justice. Riley described how general educators regularly invited her students to participate in their classrooms, not as visitors, but as rightful members of the learning community. “They are always reaching out for me to bring my kids to their class to participate… That actually has helped not only me but my students as well to feel like we actually belong.” For Riley , the invitation reflected more than cooperation; it communicated that her students were wanted, valued, and expected. Even if students received instruction in separate spaces, these gestures made clear that they still belonged in the school. Several respondents also emphasized pairing access with clear expectations. As one story completion response put it, *“Hold my students accountable for their actions.”* For BSETs, statements like this signaled a non-pitying stance that sees students with disabilities as full members of the community who can meet shared norms when supports are in place. A story completion participant captured this ethic of affirmation clearly: “It also includes celebrating the unique contributions of each teacher and student and creating a culture where diversity is viewed as a strength rather than a challenge.” For many BSETs, this orientation was essential. Seeing students through an affirming lens suggested that colleagues understood inclusion as more than access—it meant honoring the full humanity of those in the building. These perceptions signaled a deeper alignment around the purpose of education and the ethical responsibilities of teaching.

By contrast, deficit-based or ableist perceptions of students frequently strained trust and revealed value misalignments. Lewis described the professional consequences of this dynamic:

> Sometimes the general education teachers will see the behavior of our kids on our caseload and use that as a way to say or professionally judge us... One of my students, he is adored and loved by everybody. And because of that, a lot of the teachers have a good relationship with me. And then there are other students who have terrible relationships with their teachers, and those teachers use that against me. And now I have terrible relationships with those teachers. And I think that is very professionally unfair.

Alexis reflected on how these judgments stemmed from deeper cultural assumptions:

> There is a huge ableist mentality within schools. Just assuming that, you know, 'Oh, they have autism…this is going to be hard,' or seeing my classroom and saying, 'I do not know how I could do it… It is so challenging.' Like, come on, they are kids."

Latoya echoed this misperception, noting, "everybody thinks of my room probably like kids running all around fighting, throwing things. I am pretty sure that is what they think happens. But it is very, very nice and calm." These assumptions did more than frustrate; they revealed a lack of willingness to engage with complexity, to understand systemic barriers, or to co-construct inclusive educational spaces.

Across interviews and story completions, participants made clear that how students were perceived was inseparable from how they experienced collegiality and professional respect. When colleagues saw students as capable, valued, and integral to the community, BSETs felt affirmed in their roles. However, when students were seen as problems to manage, it fractured the foundation on which collaboration and belonging could be built, for both students and the educators who serve them.

Perceptions of Responsibility and Space: Inclusive Practices as Shared Work

Participants also described how general educators and administrators understood their own roles in inclusion. Belonging strengthened when colleagues treated special education not as a handoff but as shared professional work—an orientation captured in one response that valued colleagues who were "genuinely invested in celebrating our students' growth and resilience," and in another that prioritized "making a meaningful impact on student outcomes." This stance showed up in day-to-day practices that made collaboration visible and reciprocal. As one teacher explained, "Colleagues would provide lesson plans or topics weekly to help me better prepare for my students," signaling advance planning and instructional alignment. Another noted that "Colleagues would provide supplements and accommodations according to what is written in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and not rely on the special ed teacher to provide all the accommodations," indicating shared ownership of access rather than offloading. Read together, these quotes illustrate a consistent pattern: when colleagues enacted inclusion through concrete, unprompted moves—sharing plans, implementing accommodations, and working through IEP and behavior plans in tandem—they communicated respect for special educators' expertise and affirmed collaboration as a driver of student success.

This shared commitment extended beyond the classroom to include how administrators understood their responsibilities. Several participants emphasized the importance of leadership that modeled inclusive values and actively worked to remove systemic barriers. One teacher described the significance of leaders "modeling inclusive behaviors, encouraging open dialogue, and addressing any barriers, such as biases or systemic inequities that may prevent full participation." Others highlighted how trust was strengthened when administrators supported them in practical ways, such as through shared planning. One participant explained that "administrators and colleagues would work through IEP and/or behavior plans in tandem with

me." When leaders prioritized equity and trust over procedural compliance, BSETs felt seen, supported, and respected as professionals. These affirming perceptions made inclusion feel like a collective commitment rather than an isolated burden.

Participants also reflected on how space and resources shaped their sense of value. When administrators failed to provide dedicated environments for small-group or specialized instruction, it suggested a broader disregard for their work and students with disabilities. One teacher put it plainly: "If we had actual designated spaces for doing small groups for specially designed instruction, it would seem that we are important." The absence of such space sent a clear message about whose work was prioritized and whose needs were overlooked.

Taken together, these reflections demonstrate that perceptions were not incidental—they were central to the experience of belonging. Being recognized as a capable educator, a trusted collaborator, and a professional with meaningful expertise shaped whether BSETs were invited into collegial relationships that felt reciprocal and inclusive. Colleagues' and leaders' beliefs about students with disabilities further influenced these dynamics. When inclusion was viewed as a shared responsibility, and when the necessary relational and material conditions were in place, BSETs were more likely to experience belonging not as a rare exception, but as a sustained, collective practice.

Competencies and Skills: What Belonging Requires of Colleagues

Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework for belonging identifies competencies as one of the foundational elements that support inclusion. These competencies—encompassing social, emotional, and cultural skills—enable individuals to build meaningful relationships, navigate social norms, and participate fully in professional communities. For BSETs, the presence or absence of such competencies among colleagues shaped whether trust could be built,

collaboration could flourish, and belonging could be sustained. These were not abstract traits or soft skills—they were daily, observable practices that signaled whether colleagues could engage across lines of difference with humility, respect, and care.

Relational and instructional competencies also play a prominent role in Louie et al.'s (2022) theory of radical belonging, which emphasizes the need for educators to engage in mutual care, shared responsibility, and justice-oriented collaboration. Belonging, in this view, is not simply about being welcomed into existing norms—it requires colleagues to challenge racialized assumptions, attend to power dynamics, and foster trust through sustained interpersonal and institutional effort. Participants in this study echoed this sentiment, describing how emotional openness, reflexivity, and cultural responsiveness influenced their professional relationships and working conditions. When these competencies were present, they felt seen, supported, and included. When absent, their sense of safety and collegiality often eroded.

Page et al. (2021) further remind us that competencies are not only interpersonal but spatial—they shape how educators engage within relational, pedagogical, and material spaces of schools. Inclusive environments do not emerge by default; they require educators to possess and apply the skills needed for co-teaching, shared planning, and collaborative inquiry. For BSETs, collegial belonging depended not just on being granted access to these spaces, but on whether colleagues understood the practices necessary to sustain meaningful inclusion. In this way, the ability to communicate effectively, collaborate authentically, and acknowledge systemic inequities was foundational—not just to participation, but to constructing spaces where belonging could take root.

Taken together, these findings suggest that collegial belonging for BSETs is built not only through intentions but also through practiced, professional competencies. The following

subthemes explore this dynamic through three interconnected lenses: (1) relational practices that built trust, (2) relational practices that strained trust, and (3) competencies enacted on behalf of students.

Relational Practices That Built Trust

Participants emphasized that collegial belonging was not automatic but built through trust over time. For BSETs, belonging meant more than being liked or socially comfortable; it was grounded in being able to rely on colleagues in ways that affirmed their expertise and created psychological safety. This trust enabled them to enter professional spaces and collaborations that aligned with their expertise and aspirations. Across interviews and story completion responses, four relational practices stood out as especially important to cultivating such trust—and, by extension, belonging: practicing listening with integrity, humility, and reliability.

Practicing Listening with Integrity. Participants emphasized that belonging was cultivated not through surface-level collegiality, but through colleagues who listened with openness and followed through with integrity. Listening, in this sense, was not a passive act but an active engagement that fostered growth, accountability, and repair. Taylor recalled giving feedback to a colleague about how her tone affected students: “She yelled at the kids, and I finally told her that could be a trigger... she listens to everything. I love that about her. She is very receptive.” This example underscored how listening required both courage to name a concern and a willingness to receive it without defensiveness.

Other participants described listening as an ongoing, reciprocal practice. Lewis noted, “We kind of report back to each other and make plans,” illustrating how listening was embedded in collaborative rhythms rather than one-off exchanges. Riley highlighted how affirming responses from leaders helped her feel heard and supported: “If I need to ask a question, their

door is always open... when I email my principal... she always tells me, 'Oh, you are not bothering me. You can always ask me a question." A story completion respondent described this expectation in practical terms: "I would expect them to communicate with me openly, ask for my input regularly, and not be defensive in their responses if they disagree or feel challenged." Another respondent emphasized the deeper stance behind such practices, noting that trust was built when colleagues "actively seek to understand my perspective as a Black educator." Together, these accounts show that listening was not simply about hearing words in the moment, but about cultivating an openness to difference—welcoming input, seeking understanding, and responding in ways that reinforced trust.

At the same time, participants stressed that listening alone was insufficient without integrity—demonstrated through transparency, respect, and follow-through. Lewis explained, "Speak in plain language. Have complete candor. I feel like the 'agree to disagree' is sought after as an option first, rather than trying to find a middle ground." His emphasis on candor reflected how integrity required colleagues to resist avoidance and instead pursue genuine dialogue. Another participant affirmed this expectation, stating, "I need open, honest communication as the foundation of our work together." For BSETs, honest dialogue was not a nicety but a prerequisite for collaboration.

Integrity also shaped how feedback was exchanged. One participant explained, "Feedback that is specific, constructive, and focused on growth rather than criticism would allow me to improve in a supportive way. I'd ask for feedback to be shared respectfully and with guidance." Here, integrity meant pairing directness with care—ensuring that feedback was actionable and grounded in mutual respect rather than judgment.

Finally, many participants pointed out that integrity required more than good intentions; it required consistent action. As one educator put it, “There are so many ideas that come from teachers but often feel dismissed or ignored by leadership. I think that having a follow-up within a collaborative group is essential.” Another participant was more blunt: “Not just lip service…say, ‘we care about all kids,’ but not in practice.” These reflections contrasted sharply with Taylor’s positive experience: “So everything that I have been asking for or suggesting, or my ideas have been heard, and they have let me do it.” When colleagues and leaders translated listening into tangible action, participants felt that their expertise was respected and their belonging affirmed.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate that for BSETs, listening and integrity were inseparable. Listening created opportunities for concerns and ideas to surface, while integrity ensured that those words were met with honesty, respect, and meaningful follow-through. Collegial belonging, in this sense, was built not on words alone but on a consistent alignment between what was said, how it was said, and what was ultimately done.

Practicing Humility. Belonging was also supported when colleagues approached their work with humility, demonstrating a willingness to learn, ask questions, and reflect on their assumptions. Participants described humility as a practice of stepping back from claims of expertise and acknowledging what they did not know—especially in relation to students with disabilities. These actions were not perceived as weaknesses but as meaningful gestures of connection and care.

Alexis described a turning point when her general education colleague asked, “I see this kid every day [who was wandering the hallways]... what should I say to her?” She added, “She has been talking to all my kids since then.” What could have been dismissed as lack of knowledge

was instead received as an invitation to learn, opening space for collaboration and relationship-building. The simple act of asking a question signaled respect for her expertise and extended belonging not only to the teacher but to students as well. Such moments showed how humility translated into concrete relational practices that deepened trust.

Several participants also spoke to the internal work that humility requires. Morgan explained, “We have to start with changing and being exposed to different perspectives... looking deep within ourselves.” She added, “People would get discouraged... but understanding that it is a journey.” These reflections suggested that cultivating belonging among colleagues is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing process that involves emotional openness and self-examination. Through this lens, humility was framed as both personal and collective work—necessary for colleagues to engage difference without defensiveness and to sustain authentic professional relationships.

Practicing Being Reliable. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of dependable colleagues who showed up when support was needed and contributed to a sense of shared responsibility. Reliability, in their accounts, was not about personal friendship but about professional solidarity. Lewis explained, “I have colleagues who I would not ever see myself hanging out with them or being friends outside of school, but inside our relationship in school is so strong that we have each other's backs... and that is what makes me want to come here.” His reflection underscored that belonging was sustained through trust in colleagues’ consistency, even when relationships did not extend beyond the workplace. Dependability in professional contexts provided its own form of closeness, rooted in shared commitment rather than social affinity.

Other participants highlighted reliability as a collective safety net that ensured no teacher faced challenges alone. Alexis described how colleagues responded when behavioral issues arose , “If there was ever an issue with a student in the class, you know, I could call four or five different teachers of all different grade levels, and they would come in and help, or they would take the kid for a walk. You know, everybody was just on the same team.” Her account illustrated how reliability created a culture of mutual responsibility in which colleagues acted quickly and practically to provide support. This sense of “everybody on the same team” conveyed that belonging was forged through action, not rhetoric, but through colleagues demonstrating that they were willing to step in when it mattered.

A story completion respondent captured this expectation succinctly: “Support me when needed with parents and/or coworkers.” While brief, this response echoed the broader theme: reliability was not limited to logistical assistance but signaled a deeper ethic of care. Being able to count on colleagues in moments of need allowed BSETs to feel less isolated and more anchored within the professional community.

These practices of open and honest communication, active listening, humility, and reliability were not grand or performative. Instead, they were small, consistent demonstrations of care, respect, and shared responsibility. They showed participants that their contributions were valued, their presence mattered, and their relationships could be trusted. In this way, the competencies participants named were not just about professionalism; they were about building the interpersonal infrastructure of collegial belonging. When colleagues acted with integrity, listened without defensiveness, approached one another with humility, and followed through on commitments, they created a work culture in which BSETs could engage fully—not just as

teachers, but as trusted collaborators. These relational practices were the foundation upon which belonging was not only felt but sustained.

Relational Practices That Strained Trust

While some colleagues built trust through humility and consistency, others made it difficult for participants to feel safe or supported. Many BSETs described how ego, control, or performative behavior created barriers to authentic connection. Lewis reflected, "I am not sure where this ego of being in public education comes from, because we are in service to children, and that requires, in my opinion, being extremely humble." Others described how colleagues positioned themselves as the sole authority, dismissing the input of special educators or families. "And when someone says something, why question it? Because you [general educator] feel that you are the authority or the final say," Morgan explained. She also recalled a moment when advocating for a student led to outright exclusion, "this family, you know, brought a concern to me…they [general educator] turned around and said to me, 'well, you are not part of the team anymore.'" These assertions of superiority, whether expressed through tone, territoriality, or second-guessing, eroded trust and made collegial collaboration feel unsafe or disingenuous.

Beyond interpersonal dynamics, participants also encountered more structural forms of exclusion, especially when colleagues controlled access to shared spaces, information, or instructional roles. These behaviors signaled a lack of trust and disrupted opportunities for belonging. Some BSETs described territoriality as a form of gatekeeping. "I did not feel included... the senior teachers, they are kind of set in their ways. They kind of gatekeep, you know. They are like the final," Riley said. Lewis added, "I tell all my general education teachers, I am not judging you if that is what you think is happening, because a lot of teachers will gatekeep their classes."

Even when exclusion was not overt, participants often sensed when colleagues were not being sincere. “They are too drama-filled. They are too messy. They smile in people’s faces and then talk about them behind their backs,” Riley said. Morgan echoed this sentiment: “Well, I will tell you it is twofold, because I hear what people say, and I see what people say. And then, behind closed doors, it is a different conversation.” These social dynamics left participants feeling isolated, guarded, and reluctant to be vulnerable with colleagues. “It feels… almost like high school, like it feels kind of… clicky, almost,” Taylor observed. Such climates undermined psychological safety and made authentic collaboration difficult. Without mutual respect and relational trust, collegial belonging could not take hold.

Competencies Enacted on Behalf of Students

For BSETs, collegial belonging was deeply tied to how their colleagues engaged with students, particularly Black students with disabilities. Participants were clear that trust was not built in isolation from instruction; it was shaped by whether their colleagues demonstrated the relational and instructional skills needed to support all learners with care, consistency, and respect. When colleagues treated students with dignity, listened to their needs, and responded with flexibility, BSETs viewed those actions as trust-building. “I want them [general educators] to listen to the students and what they need for their education,” Lewis explained. “But people are not willing to do that… it seems to me.” His frustration underscored how the absence of responsiveness eroded trust, while meaningful attentiveness to students’ needs could strengthen it. Another participant put this more broadly, noting that inclusion demanded “meaningful contributions to student outcomes,” not symbolic gestures or rigid adherence to roles.

Participants emphasized that affirming students went beyond treating them kindly—it meant recognizing their cultural identities, honoring their autonomy, and fostering relationships

rooted in mutual respect. Morgan described how students must retain agency in their educational experiences: “They should have a voice… not someone making decisions and stripping them away of their decisions.” Similarly, Taylor stressed that belonging for students meant connection, not pity “Even if the person is not the same culture or race… have some sort of relationship or connection… not somebody feeling sorry for them.” These reflections suggested that when colleagues interacted with students authentically, BSETs felt reassured that they and their students were seen as whole, valued individuals. A story completion respondent extended this perspective to the school community as a whole, calling for educators to “celebrate the unique contributions of each teacher and student… [and] create a culture where diversity is viewed as a strength.”

Alongside these relational practices, participants stressed the importance of colleagues who could adapt instruction meaningfully and share responsibility for student learning. Flexibility that honored students’ dignity conveyed a sense of shared investment in their success. For Morgan, instructional responsiveness was particularly powerful when it was culturally attuned: “We understand that all learners learn differently… and just sometimes, you know, being able to ask a question and maybe reframing or rephrasing it so that it is culturally relevant so that a student can get it… meeting them where they are becomes a big deal.” Lewis emphasized that colleagues who took the time to understand students’ needs, rather than rigidly adhering to procedures, made inclusion feel like a collaborative rather than an isolated effort.

Yet relationship-building and academic support were only part of what students needed. Participants also emphasized the importance of emotional and behavioral competence—being able to recognize distress, prevent escalation, and respond with care. “We could tag team with teaching the kids,” Riley said. “We knew what to say to certain kids who might have triggers that

make them really mad. We knew what to do to calm them down… we love those kids." Lewis added, "… develop a relationship even with students who are difficult. Kill them with kindness." These moments of deep engagement required skill, patience, and consistency; qualities that many BSETs felt were undervalued or underdeveloped among their colleagues. Others called for proactive, schoolwide training in behavioral de-escalation and trauma-informed care. "I think everybody should get CPI [Crisis Prevention Intervention] trained," Taylor emphasized. "Because it teaches you to prevent something before anything happens, and to see the signs, and to know that every behavior means something." Without a shared commitment to students' success—academic, emotional, and human—collaboration was strained, and belonging was difficult to sustain.

Taken together, these reflections reveal that BSETs did not separate their own sense of belonging from how their students were treated. They needed colleagues who saw students, supported them skillfully, and took joint responsibility for their growth. These were not peripheral expectations. They were foundational to building a sense of belonging and affirming the shared labor of teaching.

Opportunities to Belong: Making Space to Connect, Grow, Collaborate, and Lead

While competencies describe what makes belonging possible, opportunities determine whether it can take root and be sustained. BSETs in this study made clear that inclusive intentions and interpersonal skills were not enough; belonging also required access. Without time, proximity, or explicit invitations to participate in school life, they encountered barriers that restricted their ability to form collegial relationships, contribute fully, and feel professionally affirmed. These constraints did not eliminate belonging, but they made it more challenging to build and maintain.

Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework identifies *opportunities* as one of four essential elements of belonging, emphasizing the importance of time, space, and social access in enabling meaningful participation. Their work underscores that even individuals with strong relational skills may struggle to belong if they are denied consistent and equitable access to the settings and interactions where belonging is cultivated. Page et al.'s (2021) spatial theory of belonging further highlights that these opportunities are shaped by how educators are positioned within relational, pedagogical, and material spaces. Louie et al. (2022) offer a justice-centered perspective, framing radical belonging as a practice grounded in mutual care, shared learning, and collective agency—requiring not only participation in existing structures but the transformation of those structures through collaboration and reciprocity.

Taken together, these frameworks highlight that collegial belonging is not sustained solely by skills. It is enacted through daily and institutional opportunities to engage, contribute, and lead. The following subthemes explore how BSETs experienced these opportunities across four dimensions: (1) connecting interpersonally, (2) growing professionally, (3) collaborating and contributing in service of students, and (4) leading within their school communities.

Opportunities to Connect

Collegial belonging was not built through formal structures alone; it also grew out of the everyday moments of personal connection. Participants described how unplanned interactions—such as hallway conversations, drop-ins to say hello, and shared downtime—created conditions for trust to develop naturally. For some, these moments were made possible by having shared planning time in the same physical space, even virtual space. Riley recalled memories from virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic: "We would sit there [on Zoom during planning time] and we would talk… and now we are like sisters." In this

case, virtual proximity enabled consistent informal connections, which over time nurtured not just professional rapport but also deep friendship. These relational touchpoints made professional interactions more fluid and fostered a culture of ease and care.

Participants also acknowledged the value of intentional efforts to strengthen community. "Staff appreciation, where we can informally connect and celebrate our shared successes, goes a long way in building camaraderie," one teacher reflected. Another mentioned, "Collaborative events for all staff members both inside and outside of school hours" helped create an inclusive environment. Taylor highlighted how informal gatherings sustained these connections: "We have outings… something Fridays. I go to all of them. I talk to everybody."

Still, not all educators could engage equally. "They [administration] are big into us doing things together," Riley shared, "but I can never attend because I work another job as well." These disparities in access, shaped by time, labor, and external obligations, reveal the need for intentional design in collegial opportunities. Without broad and equitable access, efforts to cultivate relational trust may inadvertently reinforce exclusion.

Opportunities to Grow

For BSETs in this study, professional growth was central to feeling affirmed and supported as full members of their school communities. Participants emphasized that collegial belonging was shaped by the opportunities they had to build their own knowledge, learn alongside colleagues, and receive feedback that centered growth—not surveillance or critique. Professional development was most meaningful when it was tied to the needs of the students they served and when colleagues were invited to participate alongside them. One participant explained, "Professional development focused on inclusive practices would empower all staff to engage meaningfully with special education methods." Another noted, "Investing in my

professional growth through relevant training or workshops would demonstrate a commitment to my development. If the school provides support for furthering my skills…it would deepen my confidence and ability to contribute effectively." For Taylor, this also meant being equipped with concrete strategies that prepared staff to support students proactively: "I think everybody should get CPI trained. Because it teaches you to prevent something before anything happens… So maybe if everybody was CPI trained, we will have more teachers willing to come in my room and help." Together, these reflections highlight that professional growth was not viewed as isolated expertise for special educators alone, but as shared learning that affirmed their roles and strengthened the collective responsibility to serve all students.

Growth also occurred through visibility and learning alongside colleagues in everyday practice. Alexis described how her classroom was often seen as separate or "fun," disconnected from rigorous instruction:

> Feeling like this island of a classroom… those types of comments, I think, would be different if there was that like, 'Oh, I can see that I am coming in here and observing you teach… a math lesson or something, something that shows and kind of challenges those ableist mindsets of, 'This is just kind of the fun class for kids.'

For her, collegial belonging was strengthened when colleagues had the opportunity to see the rigor of her teaching and challenge deficit assumptions about special education. At the same time, participants emphasized that they wanted to be included in the common practices of professional growth that their peers experienced, such as observing each other's instruction and sharing feedback. These interactions affirmed that even across different curricula, there was much to learn from one another. In this way, professional growth was not only about acquiring

new skills but also about disrupting narrow perceptions of what counted as legitimate teaching and positioning BSETs as equal members of the broader instructional community.

Finally, participants underscored the importance of feedback that honored professional dignity. One educator explained, “I would ask for feedback to be shared respectfully and with guidance on how I can enhance my contributions, not only to benefit students but also to strengthen my own professional journey.” When feedback was framed as constructive rather than evaluative, it affirmed their expertise and reinforced a sense of collegial belonging.

Opportunities to Collaborate and Contribute

Beyond professional development and feedback, BSETs described how collegial belonging was fostered through opportunities to collaborate closely with colleagues who directly supported their students and to contribute to broader conversations and initiatives that shaped school practices. These dimensions of engagement were distinct but interconnected, each affirming their expertise and reinforcing that their voices mattered within the school community. Collaboration with general educators was particularly meaningful when it reflected trust in their instructional expertise. Lewis shared, “I have taken both my caseload kids and kids who are not even on my caseload and worked with them in tandem… That is why I like working with my two math teachers; they allow me to stand up in front of the class and actually teach.” Being invited to lead instruction, rather than simply support it, signaled recognition as a teacher rather than an aide or behavioral manager.

Other participants highlighted how collaboration extended beyond lesson delivery to include opportunities for students to participate more fully in school life. Riley explained that colleagues often initiated ways for her students to join in: “They are always reaching out for me to bring my kids to their class to participate in an activity with their students or go on a field trip

with them…" These invitations, she noted, made "not only me but my students as well, to feel like we actually belong." For Riley, collaboration was not confined to co-teaching—it was also about colleagues making space for shared experiences that affirmed belonging. Taylor gave a similar example of how colleagues opened access to inclusive environments during specials: "Even the art teacher gives them their own specials… So I love that my colleagues reach out to me like, 'Hey, this gym time is open if they want to go up and run around and play sports.'" These gestures, while simple, conveyed care and responsibility for students with disabilities, reinforcing that they were integral to the school community.

To make collaboration sustainable, participants emphasized the need for consistent planning structures. One teacher expressed a desire for more routine opportunities to meet: "regular education teacher colleagues would meet with me weekly at a minimum. To recap student progress and effectiveness of supports." Without such structures, collaboration often felt fragmented and inconsistent, limiting both teacher belonging and student inclusion. Contribution also extended beyond classrooms to participation in schoolwide dialogue and decision-making. One explained the importance of intentional communication, noting that "clear communication channels can ensure that my input is genuinely considered and not overlooked." Others proposed practical strategies such as "written opportunities to express opinions (e.g., a Google form ahead of a meeting), especially about equity," or "creating structured spaces where all teachers can share their expertise without fear of dismissal or judgment." Respondents also reiterated that these efforts had to be sustained and systemic, pointing to practices such as "holding monthly assemblies and after-school meetings with all stakeholders on what they feel or think the school should work on to include them and their culture." Others emphasized the value of ongoing access to administrators, noting the importance of "making sure there are check-in times with

admin for staff members as needed." Together, these accounts highlighted that contribution was not abstract, but grounded in specific structures that could affirm teachers' voices and influence school culture.

Some participants described how these opportunities to contribute were most powerful when they involved shaping school policies in real time. Taylor recalled a moment when administrators sought her expertise: "They asked me what we should do about the CBU [Competency Based Program]… they came to me first, and I really liked that." Alexis shared a similar experience, reflecting on how she and her colleagues designed behavioral practices collaboratively: "So it felt like there was that buy-in because we did it as a team, rather than, 'Here is your handbook, and here is how behavior works, and here is what we are doing.'" Being part of these conversations, she explained, "really helped" her feel ownership over the decisions. Both educators pointed to the importance of agency—of being trusted to help shape systems they were expected to carry out. In these instances, belonging was not tied to titles or formal positions, but to being recognized as thought partners and decision-makers.

At the same time, participants reflected on how institutional barriers limited opportunities to collaborate and contribute. Lewis recalled a conversation with another special educator who was surprised at his access to general education classrooms: "I have actually had colleagues who are like, 'Really? You are allowed in their classroom?' Like, 'Yeah, you are not?' They are like, 'No, we have to go to our own room or the basement.'" Taylor added that physical separation itself was not always the issue; rather, it was the lack of flexibility to move across spaces freely, "I want them to feel included, even though we are in the basement, but I want them to have the option of saying, 'Oh, we will go to the assembly'…I want them to have the option." These

accounts revealed how spatial restrictions curtailed visibility, movement, and engagement, undermining the very conditions that made collaboration and contribution possible.

Opportunities to Lead

Finally, participants reflected on the importance of access to formal leadership roles and positions within their schools. While collaboration and contribution affirmed their expertise in daily practice, being entrusted with leadership responsibilities carried symbolic and practical weight. For BSETs, belonging was reinforced when they were not only consulted but also recognized as capable of holding visible roles that shaped the direction of the school. Several teachers expressed a desire for more structured avenues to step into these roles. One explained the need for schools to "provide opportunities to share my expertise and perspective" and to "display my natural-born leadership skills." Another called for "a focus on leadership opportunities for minorities," pointing to the lack of diversity in current structures:

> There are not enough diverse leadership roles. In my personal experience, all the leadership roles within groups at school are held by white nondisabled people. Making inclusion and diversity a goal for a school without their voice being heard seems inauthentic.

Echoing this point, another participant noted, "I do not see a lot of African Americans in leadership positions." The absence of representation reinforced feelings of marginality, even when collegial relationships were affirming. Taken together, these reflections illustrate that opportunities to lead were tied to visibility, representation, and equity. For BSETs, belonging was not fully realized unless they were trusted to hold positions of authority that recognized their expertise, shifted school culture, and provided models of leadership that reflected the diversity of the communities they served.

Conclusion

Perceptions, competencies, and opportunities did not function independently. They intersected to shape how BSETs experienced inclusion, legitimacy, and connection in their schools. Across these themes, participants pointed to the daily actions and systemic conditions that made belonging possible or impossible. The discussion that follows revisits these findings through the study's conceptual frameworks of belonging and considers what they reveal about retaining and supporting BSETs.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the findings of this study in relation to existing scholarship and the conceptual frameworks of belonging introduced in Chapter Two. The discussion asks: what do these findings mean for how we understand collegial belonging, particularly for Black special educators who navigate both racialized and role-specific conditions in schools?

This study challenges dominant, Western conceptualizations of belonging as an individual psychological state or static outcome. For participants, collegial belonging was neither self-contained nor purely personal. It was shaped by how their students were seen and served—by whether Black students with disabilities were treated as rightful members of the school community and afforded opportunities to participate socially, academically, and democratically. These conditions deeply impacted how the educators who served them experienced belonging. As such, collegial belonging emerged not as a status one achieves, but as a relational and institutional condition shaped by recognition, access, and care.

Understanding collegial belonging requires situating it within the broader conversation about teacher retention—particularly for those most likely to be pushed out of the profession. While this study focused on belonging, not attrition, participants' experiences echoed the same institutional conditions that research has long linked to teacher turnover. For special educators, those conditions often include lack of collaboration, inadequate administrative support, and unsustainable workloads (Billingsley et al., 2020; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Stark et al., 2021). For Black educators, job satisfaction is shaped not only by structural supports but by how frequently they encounter misrecognition, resistance to equity work, and racialized stress (Acosta, 2019; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Grooms et al., 2021; Kohli, 2019; Griffin et al.,

2022). Yet far less is known about how these dynamics combine for Black special educators. This study offers insight into that intersection, showing how collegial belonging was shaped by both the institutional context of special education and the racialized perceptions participants routinely faced.

Participants did not speak of belonging as a static trait or a permanent achievement. Rather, it ebbed and flowed depending on leadership, team dynamics, and how their work—and their students—were positioned within the school. Still, their accounts revealed more than fluctuation; they revealed pattern and precision. Participants described how belonging was fostered through recognition, trust, and shared responsibility—and how it was fractured by isolation, tokenization, or rigid hierarchies. Their reflections challenge surface-level accounts of teacher satisfaction or burnout, offering instead a deeper, more relational understanding of what sustains Black special educators and the inclusive communities they seek to build.

This study also expands the conceptual boundaries of what collegial belonging entails. Belonging was not reducible to proximity, congeniality, or access to team structures. It was contingent on how participants and their students were perceived, on the competencies colleagues brought to daily interactions, and on the opportunities educators had to connect, contribute, and lead. These elements did not function as discrete categories but interacted in layered ways—affirming belonging in some moments and undermining it in others.

To better articulate these layers, I developed an integrated model of collegial belonging (Figure 6), building upon the frameworks of Allen et al. (2021), Louie et al. (2022), and Page et al. (2021). The model situates four core components—motivations, perceptions, competencies, and opportunities—within three overlapping domains: social, academic, and democratic. It is designed not as a hierarchy but as an ecological system in which teacher and student belonging

are mutually influential. In other words, how students are positioned in these domains—whether they are included socially, supported academically, and given voice democratically—directly impacts how the educators who serve them experience collegial belonging.

What distinguishes this model is its attention to the interaction of race, role, and context. It underscores how special education teachers' experiences of belonging are shaped not just by professional dynamics but by broader ideological and spatial conditions. The same leadership structure, planning meeting, or co-teaching assignment could either foster or fracture belonging depending on how it was enacted. And for Black special educators, these dynamics were deeply racialized: their motivations to serve were high, but often taxed by misrecognition; their competencies were strong, but often unacknowledged; their opportunities were shaped not just by scheduling or staffing, but by how students with disabilities were regarded in the school's cultural narrative.

In the sections that follow, I apply the integrated model to interpret the findings through two connected layers. First, I consider motivation as the foundation for collegial belonging—the spark that drives Black special educators' commitment to collaboration and advocacy. I then examine how motivation converged with perceptions, competencies, and opportunities across the social, academic, and democratic life of schools. This organization makes clear that belonging was not shaped by access alone, but by how colleagues perceived Black special educators, the relational and instructional skills they brought to daily interactions, and the opportunities afforded to connect, contribute, and lead. In doing so, the discussion highlights both the conditions that sustained collegial belonging and the forces that undermined it, underscoring why attention to both is essential for creating schools that are relationally and institutionally inclusive.

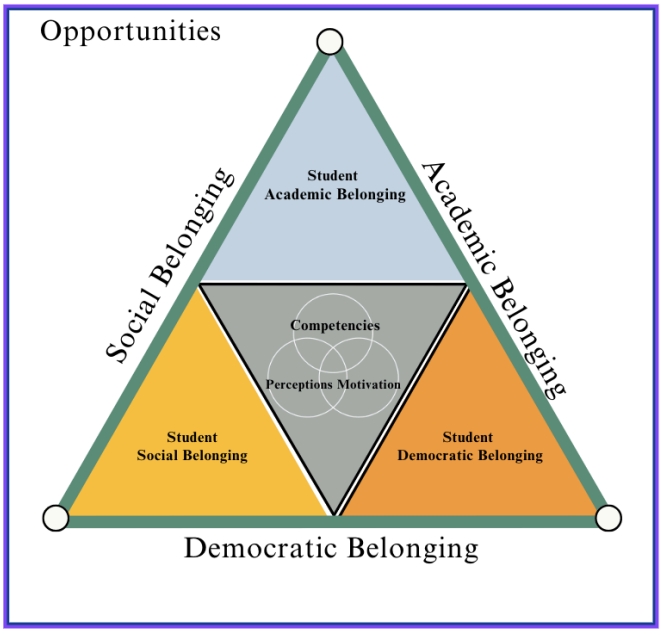
Interpreting the Frameworks

The Integrated Model of Collegial Belonging

The visual framework developed through this study (see Figure 6) builds on the theoretical synthesis introduced in Chapter 2, but reflects a more refined understanding shaped by the full arc of data collection and analysis. Developed after both the story completion task and interviews, the framework illustrates collegial belonging as a layered, dynamic process—one that is profoundly influenced by how Black special educators and the students they serve are perceived, supported, and situated within school communities. In contrast to research that treats teacher and student belonging as separate constructs, this study demonstrates that for Black special educators, the two are inseparable: their legitimacy as professionals was tied to whether their students were recognized as capable learners with a rightful place in the school community.

Figure 6

An Integrated Model of Collegial Belonging



Note. This figure extends the conceptual framework presented in Figure 5 to illustrate how students' social, academic, and democratic belonging are nested within educators' opportunities for social, academic, and democratic belonging. This visual is informed by the integration of frameworks from Allen et al. (2021), Louie et al. (2022), and Page et al. (2021).

This framework integrates Allen et al.'s (2021) emphasis on perceptions, competencies, motivations, and opportunities; Louie et al.'s (2022) insistence that belonging across social, academic, and democratic domains must reinforce one another; and Page et al.'s (2021) attention to how belonging is shaped by material, relational, and pedagogical spaces. In bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the model provides a language for describing the concrete ways collegial belonging is cultivated, constrained, or fractured for Black special educators. Rather than abstract calls for "support" or "inclusion," the framework identifies the specific conditions—recognition of expertise, demonstration of relational competencies, and equitable access to collaborative and leadership opportunities—that matter most for sustaining BSETs. Yet much of the scholarship on belonging, particularly within Western educational contexts, has framed it as a matter of individual fit or resilience—an internal sense of connection rather than a condition shaped by systems and relationships. Such perspectives risk obscuring how racism and ableism contour the very spaces into which individuals are expected to "fit."

This study takes a different approach by centering Black special educators and conceptualizing belonging as a collective, negotiated process contingent on recognition, relationships, and equitable opportunities. In doing so, it brings into focus the layered ways that race and role combine to shape collegial belonging. Situating the integrated model within the broader scholarly conversation makes clear how it builds on and extends existing research. Work on special educators has underscored the importance of administrative support, collaboration, role clarity, and persistence (Billingsley et al., 2020; Stark et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020). Meanwhile, scholarship on Black educators has documented the racialized workplace experiences that undermine belonging, including misrecognition of pedagogical excellence, racialized stress, tokenization, and barriers to

retention (Acosta, 2019; Frank et al., 2021; Grooms et al., 2021; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; Kohli, 2019; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Achinstein et al., 2010; Scott, Cormier, et al., 2022; Scott, Taylor, et al., 2022;). Scott (2025) sharpens this picture by theorizing that special educators of color face uniquely racialized working conditions that combine the structural burdens of special education with psychological burdens tied to deficit perceptions, tokenization, and role misrecognition.

By centering this intersection, the present study extends these literatures in two key ways. First, it demonstrates that for Black special educators, race and role are inseparable in shaping collegial belonging. Their professional legitimacy was bound not only to how they were perceived but also to how their students with disabilities—often Black students—were viewed within the school community. Deficit assumptions about disability intersected with racial stereotypes to position both students and teachers at the margins. Second, the integrated model makes explicit what has often remained implicit: that belonging for Black special educators cannot be reduced to the challenges of special educators generally or the racialized burdens of Black professionals in other fields. It is precisely the intersection of race and role that makes their experiences distinctive and that calls for new conceptual and practical responses.

This study does not propose a fixed sequence or universal hierarchy of belonging. Instead, it offers a flexible yet precise vocabulary for examining how belonging is negotiated across relationships, settings, and identities. By linking educator and student belonging, by naming the components that enable or inhibit collegial trust, and by showing how those components can vary across contexts, this integrated model provides a foundation for more rigorous research and more intentional practice.

Motivation Component

For Black special educators in this study, motivation to engage with colleagues was rooted in more than professional obligation. It reflected a deep ethic of care and responsibility to students with disabilities and the communities they came from. This aligns with what McKinney de Royston et al. (2021) describe as "politicized caring" and with Scott et al.'s (2021) accounts of Black special educators acting as cultural brokers and advocates. In this study, motivation to serve and to advocate was not an extra layer on top of their work—it was the foundation of collegial belonging.

At the same time, motivation was not limitless. Participants' experiences echoed Scott's (2025) theorization of "racialized psychological burdens" as they navigated tokenization, misrecognition, and deficit perceptions of competence. Achinstein et al. (2010) similarly note that teachers of color often encounter resistance when they advocate for students. Withdrawal, in this context, was not disinterest but a form of self-protection. Whether motivation was sustained depended heavily on workplace conditions. Farinde-Wu and Fitchett (2018) emphasize that recognition of contributions shapes Black women teachers' job satisfaction, and Scott et al. (2021) show that special educators persist when they feel supported and efficacious. My findings reinforce these insights: colleagues who modeled humility, listened openly, and shared responsibility for students helped sustain motivation. When those conditions were absent, motivation eroded under the weight of marginalization.

Taken together, these insights echo Allen et al.'s (2021) framing of motivation as relational rather than purely internal. What this study contributes is a sharper picture of how race and role make those relational dynamics even more pronounced. Black special educators entered their schools motivated to serve and to build collective responsibility, but whether that

motivation translated into collegial belonging depended on whether colleagues met them with respect and reciprocity. In other words, motivation was the spark, but belonging required fuel.

The fuel that sustained or extinguished motivation came in the form of opportunities—concrete openings to connect socially, to grow academically, and to lead democratically. Yet opportunities were never neutral. Their impact depended on how Black special educators were perceived, whether colleagues enacted the competencies necessary for genuine collaboration, and whether the structures of the school created space for equitable participation. The sections that follow illustrate how social, academic, and democratic opportunities became the proving grounds where collegial belonging was either nurtured or denied.

Social Opportunities

For Black special educators, social belonging was not forged through grand gestures but through small, consistent acts of recognition. Hallway conversations, greetings, and moments of shared downtime signaled collegial respect and helped affirm their place within the professional community. Importantly, belonging did not require cultivating friendships outside of school. Many valued opportunities to connect during the school day, whether through informal collaboration or shared celebrations of student growth, and noted that after-hours gatherings were often inaccessible due to responsibilities like childcare or additional employment. What mattered was not the form of interaction but the respect and consistency communicated through it.

These everyday encounters may appear inconsequential, yet prior research shows that small moments accumulate powerfully: microaggressions erode trust over time, while microaffirmations can build it (Achinstein et al., 2010; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Kohli, 2019). For Black special educators, microaffirmations—colleagues choosing to engage, listen,

and recognize their contributions—were critical to sustaining collegial belonging. But perceptions and competencies shaped whether these opportunities were realized. Belonging was nurtured when colleagues approached with humility and openness, and fractured when avoidance, gatekeeping, or rigid hierarchies reinforced marginalization. Leaders and colleagues also needed the competence to ask directly how Black special educators wanted to engage socially. For some, spontaneous "pop-ins" were welcome; for others, they felt intrusive. Respecting these differences required candor and cultural responsiveness—skills essential to sustaining collegial trust.

The treatment of students was also inseparable from teachers' experiences of social belonging. When students with disabilities were welcomed into schoolwide events, classroom rituals, or hallway exchanges, their inclusion affirmed their humanity and, by extension, the legitimacy of their teachers. McKinney de Royston et al. (2021) highlight that care for Black students must encompass both nurturing and protection—ensuring they are seen as children worthy of joy, safety, and community. When colleagues enacted this form of care by inviting students into the social life of schools, they also created conditions that affirmed Black special educators. Conversely, exclusion of students signaled exclusion of their teachers. As Louie et al. (2022) argue, belonging is not an individual feeling but a collective condition: when students are embraced, educators are too; when they are marginalized, their teachers are pushed to the periphery.

Academic Opportunities

If social opportunities opened doors to trust, academic opportunities opened doors to recognition. Professional learning, instructional collaboration, and co-teaching all held the potential to build collegial belonging, but only when grounded in respect and reciprocity.

Research has long shown that opportunities for growth and collaboration are central to teacher retention (Billingsley et al., 2020; Stark et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2019). Yet professional learning often fails to address the realities of special educators (Brown et al., 2020; Billingsley et al., 2020) and of educators of color (Kohli, 2019; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). These broader patterns were mirrored in Black special educators' experiences: being excluded from planning meetings or sidelined during professional development reinforced that access alone did not create belonging.

Perceptions played a decisive role. Belonging was affirmed when colleagues and leaders perceived that Black special educators should be integral to instructional dialogue and when they understood that learning to support students with disabilities and marginalized learners benefits all educators, not just specialists. Academic opportunities were meaningful when collaboration was framed as shared professional growth, where knowledge about inclusive practices was treated as central to improving outcomes for every student. By contrast, when inclusive pedagogy was positioned as optional, or when BSETs' expertise was sidelined, opportunities that might have fostered connection instead reinforced isolation.

Opportunities were also shaped by whether schools created space for politicized forms of learning. McKinney de Royston et al. (2021) emphasize that teaching requires racialized and politicized awareness, and that educators must engage in this work collectively. For Black special educators, belonging was affirmed when professional development and collaboration addressed issues of race, disability, and equity in ways that positioned both Black and white, general and special educators as co-learners. These opportunities signaled that responsibility for marginalized students was shared across the school community. When such spaces were absent, however, Black special educators shouldered the burden of advocacy alone, underscoring how

the lack of politicized dialogue foreclosed the potential of academic opportunities to foster belonging.

Louie et al.'s (2022) framework of radical belonging helps explain why these conditions mattered: care without shared responsibility is insufficient. Belonging required collective engagement in instructional equity, not symbolic gestures of inclusion. Page et al.'s (2021) attention to pedagogical space extends this insight by showing how academic opportunities are structured by which knowledge is legitimized and which practices are prioritized. When colleagues recognized BSETs as instructional partners and when students with disabilities were prioritized as capable learners, academic opportunities reinforced belonging. When these conditions were absent, belonging fractured at both the professional and pedagogical levels.

Democratic Opportunities

If social opportunities built trust and academic opportunities fostered recognition, democratic opportunities revealed whether BSETs were truly heard. Belonging was closely tied to whether they were invited into decision-making processes—and whether those invitations carried genuine weight. At times, participants described leaders who sought their input on spatial or instructional decisions related to students with disabilities, on strategies to support all learners, or on broader equity initiatives, affirming their role as co-constructors of school life. More often, however, they recounted exclusionary structures that either tokenized their voices or bypassed them altogether.

Louie et al.'s (2022) framework of democratic belonging underscores that educators must be active agents in shaping their school communities, not passive participants. For Black special educators, this meant that inclusion in decision-making spaces only fostered belonging when their contributions were treated as meaningful and consequential. Presence without recognition

or influence was experienced as tokenism rather than participation. Whether democratic opportunities deepened or undermined belonging depended on colleagues' perceptions of their expertise and on leaders' ability to create structures that genuinely valued diverse voices. Research on teacher retention underscores the stakes of these dynamics: Grooms et al. (2021) and Carver-Thomas (2018) show that educators of color are often denied authentic authority even as they are tasked with equity labor, while Achinstein et al. (2010) illustrate how institutional resistance emerges when teachers of color advocate for marginalized students. For Black special educators, these challenges were compounded by the historical devaluation of special education itself (Scott, Taylor, et al., 2022). Democratic opportunities thus mattered not simply as venues for teacher input, but as spaces where deficit views could be challenged and equitable practices advanced.

Belonging was also shaped by how colleagues engaged with students. BSETs described developing greater trust in colleagues who listened to students with disabilities, co-created learning experiences with them, and recognized their right to participate in shaping classroom life. These practices signaled that students were seen as capable and worthy of contributing to their own learning—not as subjects of instruction to be acted upon, but as partners in the process. This dynamic resonates with McKinney de Royston et al.'s (2021) concept of politicized caring, which frames care as both nurturing and protective. When colleagues enacted this form of care—by holding students to high expectations and creating space for their voices without demanding conformity to white, neurotypical norms—trust and collegial belonging deepened. Conversely, when students were infantilized or denied opportunities to shape their learning, Black special educators felt compelled to step in protectively. In those moments, belonging

fractured not because they were excluded as professionals, but because they were left to shoulder the protective work alone.

The Complexities of Collegial Belonging

While the integrated model offers clarity around motivations, perceptions, competencies, and opportunities, it also makes visible the complexities of how belonging unfolds in practice. These complexities remind us that belonging is never a fixed state, but always shifting—contingent on relationships, roles, and contexts. As Ajjawi and Gravett (2025) argue, belonging is not a stable, individualized sense of "fit," but a dynamic and negotiated process shaped through interactions and environments. This study extends that insight by showing how, for Black special educators, belonging is also profoundly mediated by the intersections of race and role.

One complexity centered on responsibility and care. Participants wanted their colleagues to take responsibility for supporting all learners by developing the skills needed to teach students with disabilities. They resisted being positioned as the "sole caretakers" or as educators with "magical skills" who alone could meet students' needs. Yet they also valued humility when colleagues admitted what they did not know and asked for help. The fine line, then, was between colleagues who relied too heavily on Black special educators to educate them, and those who took it upon themselves to deepen their own practice. Belonging was fostered not by deferring all expertise to BSETs, but by building a culture of collective responsibility in which learning and care were shared.

A second complexity arose around space and inclusion. Black special educators working in self-contained settings expressed a desire for greater access to general education classrooms for both themselves and their students, while also describing their own classrooms as protective,

affirming spaces. This duality complicates how we think about inclusion. On the one hand, research shows that self-contained placements do not improve academic outcomes (Barron et al., 2024; Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). On the other hand, these studies rarely ask whether outcomes might differ when self-contained spaces are led by teachers of color who bring high expectations, cultural knowledge, and protective relational practices. The possibility that these spaces can simultaneously shield students from deficit views and risk reinforcing separation underscores that belonging is not reducible to simplistic binaries of inclusion versus exclusion.

Finally, the complexities of belonging were not experienced uniformly. They varied depending on age, years of teaching experience, pathways into the profession, gender identity, instructional delivery model, and the racial demographics of the school. In this study, most participants worked in predominantly white institutions, which heightened the salience of race and role. Yet even within that context, no two story completion responses or interview accounts were exactly the same. Some experiences overlapped in meaningful ways, while others diverged, reflecting how identity and context shape the contours of belonging.

The integrated model does not erase these differences but provides a shared language for naming them. By situating belonging in terms of motivations, perceptions, competencies, and opportunities—nested across social, academic, and democratic domains—the model creates space for dialogue about how these complexities play out in the daily lives of Black special educators. It also underscores this study's central contribution: that collegial belonging for BSETs cannot be disentangled from how their students are positioned in schools. This nested reality distinguishes their experiences from both special educators broadly and Black educators in general, complicating existing assumptions about belonging as either an individual trait or a universal condition.

Equally important, this study documents how belonging is not monolithic even within the category of Black special educators. Age, years of experience, gender identity, instructional delivery model, and school demographics all shaped whether belonging felt possible, strained, or protective. That variation points to the need for research that does not homogenize BSETs as a single group but instead examines how intersections of race, role, and context interact in specific and shifting ways. In doing so, this study offers both conceptual clarity and new vocabulary for future inquiry: belonging as a layered, negotiated, and contextually contingent condition—shaped through democratic, academic, and social opportunities as much as through perceptions, motivations, and competencies. As the next section outlines, the integrated model has direct implications for how teacher preparation programs, school leaders, and educators can create conditions that make belonging more than a possibility—making it a sustained, collective reality.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study underscore that belonging cannot be treated as an incidental byproduct of collegial goodwill. It must be cultivated through intentional actions that address the racialized and role-specific realities of Black special educators' work. The sections that follow outline implications across two domains: (1) teacher preparation in higher education and (2) the combined responsibilities of in-service educators and school leaders. Each recommendation is grounded in the integrated model, centering race and role to highlight the structural and relational changes necessary for sustaining Black special educators' collegial belonging.

Reimagining Preparation in Higher Education

Given that participants in this study primarily worked in schools where their colleagues were white, the majority of these recommendations are directed toward preservice teachers in

predominantly white institutions. While all teacher candidates need preparation in how to foster belonging, white preservice general and special educators in particular must be explicitly taught that schools are not inherently spaces of belonging—even if they aspire to be. Having often been educated in majority-white schools where they themselves were not in the minority, many enter preparation programs assuming belonging is the default. This study makes clear that it is not. Belonging must be intentionally created—not by assimilating colleagues and students into dominant norms of "fitting in," but by cultivating practices that recognize and affirm multiple ways of belonging.

Preparation programs should therefore treat belonging as a central component of professional learning, rather than as a byproduct of climate or personality. Introducing preservice teachers to frameworks such as Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative model, Louie et al.'s (2022) radical belonging, Page et al.'s (2021) spatial theory, and the integrated model developed in this study can provide language and analytic tools for naming how belonging is shaped through perceptions, competencies, motivations, and opportunities—nested across social, academic, and democratic domains. Using these frameworks in coursework and clinical seminars allows preservice teachers to critically examine both their own educational histories and the relational and structural conditions they encounter in field placements.

Equally critical is designing opportunities for interdisciplinary connection and collaborative preparation. Too often, general and special education candidates are trained separately, with limited opportunities to plan, problem-solve, or even dialogue together. Participants in this study described how such divisions reinforced assumptions about who held expertise, who was consulted in decision-making, and who belonged in leadership roles. Preparation programs can interrupt these patterns by offering co-taught coursework, joint clinical

seminars, and cross-role fieldwork teams where preservice teachers collaboratively analyze cases, practice inclusive planning, and surface the assumptions that often underlie role divisions.

Field experiences should also require preservice teachers to engage directly in structured feedback dialogues about relational and collaborative skills. Rather than relying solely on self-reflection, candidates should invite colleagues in their placement schools—especially those in different roles or from different racial and cultural backgrounds—to offer advice on how they might improve their listening, communication, collaboration, and support of neurodiverse and racially diverse students. Candidates can then bring this feedback back to their university coursework to share, discuss, and reflect together with peers. Recording or documenting these conversations provides material for structured analysis: How does the feedback challenge assumptions? What new practices might be required? How might these skills be taught to students themselves? In this way, belonging is framed not as an abstract value but as a practiced competency, subject to dialogue, critique, and improvement.

For Black preservice special educators, these practices require careful facilitation. Their legitimacy, as this study demonstrates, is often tied to how their students are perceived, which makes the stakes of "belonging" particularly high. It is therefore essential that programs avoid burdening Black and other minoritized candidates with the responsibility of teaching their white peers about exclusion. Affinity spaces can provide room for Black preservice teachers and other candidates of color to process their experiences separately, while faculty ensure that white preservice teachers do the work of critically interrogating whiteness and deficit assumptions themselves. Faculty play a crucial role here: guiding difficult dialogues, ensuring feedback is not weaponized, and teaching preservice teachers that belonging is not a given, but a skill that must be practiced collectively and equitably.

Ultimately, preparation in higher education must send candidates into the profession with the understanding that belonging is not incidental to teaching but integral to it. It requires structural design, relational effort, and ideological clarity. Programs that fail to center belonging risk reproducing the very silos, exclusions, and inequities that participants in this study identified as barriers. Programs that succeed will graduate teachers who understand belonging as a professional responsibility: one that extends to students, colleagues, and the broader school community.

Sustaining Belonging Among In-Service Educators and Leaders

Sustaining collegial belonging requires more than goodwill; it demands intentional structures and leadership that make space for equity in everyday practice. For Black special educators, the question was not whether colleagues and leaders were "nice," but whether schools created the conditions—social, academic, and democratic—for belonging to take root. Because participants in this study primarily worked in predominantly white schools, these recommendations speak especially to white leaders and to white general and special educators, who bear responsibility for recognizing that belonging is not automatic but must be deliberately created in ways that resist assimilation into white norms.

Leadership is central here. Belonging cannot be treated as an individual trait or a reflection of "school climate"—it is the product of how systems are structured, resourced, and led. Leaders set the tone by determining whether staff are granted time and space to collaborate, whether professional learning opportunities are accessible across roles, and whether decision-making structures invite diverse voices. These are not peripheral matters; they are core conditions of equity. Professionalism must be understood to include the relational work of

listening, collaboration, and cultural humility. Without institutional support for these competencies, belonging remains precarious and unevenly distributed.

At the same time, systems of recognition must affirm the everyday relational labor that sustains school communities. Teachers who mentor colleagues, share responsibility for students, and interrupt exclusionary practices contribute as much to the fabric of schools as those who meet instructional benchmarks. Peer-nominated recognitions—"collaboration acknowledgments"—offer one way to surface these contributions. When integrated into staff meetings or evaluation systems, they signal that relational labor and equity-focused practices are valued alongside instructional outcomes. Importantly, such recognition should not reward "niceness" alone but should emphasize acts of equity: sharing responsibility, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering student belonging.

Leaders also need to reconsider how they learn about educators' belonging. Relying on open staff discussions may not be sufficient, especially when racial power dynamics make honest dialogue difficult. Feedback systems should be designed with care—offering anonymous online submissions, focus groups facilitated by respected Black or Brown educators, or structured surveys that foreground belonging across academic, social, and democratic domains. These processes should avoid assumptions—for example, presuming that teachers in self-contained classrooms do not want access to content-area professional development or that social outings suffice as inclusion efforts. Instead, questions should be open-ended, allowing educators to define for themselves the kinds of opportunities that would sustain their participation and legitimacy. Providing shared language about belonging can further strengthen these feedback systems, ensuring that staff are equipped to recognize and articulate the conditions they need.

Finally, schools and districts must develop tools to measure belonging systemically. While organizational instruments exist to assess bias, inclusion, or psychological safety, they rarely capture the academic, social, and democratic dimensions of belonging that matter in schools. Adapting or creating tools that reflect these dimensions—and grounding them in the perspectives of historically excluded educators—would enable schools to identify patterns of exclusion, anticipate retention risks, and evaluate whether institutional commitments to equity are actually taking hold.

These recommendations underscore that sustaining belonging is not only a matter of preparation or individual skill but of institutional responsibility. Schools must treat belonging as structural, relational, and measurable—anchored in the social, academic, and democratic opportunities that make participation possible. Still, practice alone cannot carry this work forward. To deepen and extend what this study has begun, future research is needed to test, refine, and expand the integrated model of collegial belonging across contexts, roles, and service delivery models. The next section outlines several directions for that inquiry.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies can build on the integrated model of collegial belonging by examining how opportunities to engage in social, academic, and democratic spaces interact with perceptions, competencies, and motivations across varied educational contexts. Importantly, these investigations must attend to how race and role intersect in shaping belonging. For Black special educators, belonging is never only about collegial interaction—it is tied to whether their students are recognized as full participants in the school community. Future work should therefore explore not only how educators experience belonging, but also how student inclusion mediates teacher legitimacy across settings.

One avenue of research is to consider how the model operates across service delivery structures and grade levels. In co-teaching environments, for instance, the availability of opportunities for joint planning and shared instructional leadership may be critical for shaping perceptions of responsibility. In more isolated environments, such as self-contained classrooms, competencies related to advocacy, independent leadership, and sustaining high expectations may take on greater importance. Comparative studies could illuminate how these dynamics differ across elementary, middle, and secondary schools, or across districts with varying racial demographics.

A second direction involves exploring how these components evolve over time and under different institutional conditions. Longitudinal research could track how novice Black special educators, entering predominantly white schools, experience belonging differently from those with more years of experience or those working in more racially diverse contexts. Such studies could also examine how shifting policies—around inclusion, accountability, or professional evaluation—reshape the availability of democratic, academic, and social opportunities for both teachers and students.

A third direction is to investigate how the interaction of these components influences teacher retention. Research could ask: How do democratic opportunities, such as involvement in decision-making or equity initiatives, affect educators' motivations to remain in the profession? How do academic opportunities, such as access to professional development, align with perceptions of whether their expertise is recognized? How do relational competencies—such as colleagues' humility and cultural responsiveness—buffer against the psychological burdens described by Scott (2025) and others? Centering these questions on Black special educators could clarify how retention is shaped by conditions that are both racialized and role-specific.

Finally, there is a need for tools that measure belonging in ways that reflect the full complexity of the integrated model. Existing organizational surveys capture dimensions like inclusion or psychological safety, but they rarely assess the layered interplay of opportunities, perceptions, competencies, and motivations—or how these intersect with race and role. New instruments could combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to document not only whether educators feel they belong, but how belonging is enacted in practice. Such tools could differentiate experiences across general education teachers, special educators, and staff of color, revealing where belonging is cultivated, conditional, or constrained. Developing these tools would allow schools and districts to move beyond surface indicators of climate toward a deeper assessment of equity and inclusion. They could also generate comparative insights about how Black special educators' experiences converge with or diverge from those of special educators more broadly, or Black professionals in other fields. In doing so, future research could extend this study's contribution: demonstrating that collegial belonging is not a static state or individual disposition, but a negotiated, racialized, and context-dependent condition—one that requires intentional design to sustain.

Although this study makes several contributions by foregrounding Black special educators and developing an integrated model of collegial belonging, it is also bounded by its scope and design. Recognizing these limitations is not meant to diminish the significance of the findings but to situate them within the specific contexts in which they were generated. Attending to these boundaries clarifies how the study should and should not be generalized, while also pointing toward areas where further inquiry is needed.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. One limitation was the limited opportunity to pilot the story completion task with a broader group of BSETs. Although initial feedback from a small group of BSETs helped shape the story stem, additional time to engage more deeply with pilot participants may have allowed for the development of an even stronger prompt—one that more clearly highlighted the types of collegial interactions that foster belonging for BSETs.

A second limitation concerns the specificity of the story stem itself. While participants responded to a general prompt about collegial dynamics, the stem did not explicitly identify the type of colleague (e.g., general educator, administrator, paraprofessional). Providing more targeted or differentiated story stems may have elicited more nuanced insights into how BSETs experience belonging differently depending on the roles and behaviors of various colleagues. Future research could explore how specific relational dynamics—across positional hierarchies and collaborative roles—shape teachers' sense of inclusion or exclusion.

A third limitation relates to the school contexts of participants. The majority of BSETs in this study reported working in schools with limited racial diversity and a predominance of white, female educators. While this pattern aligns with national data and corroborates existing literature on the racialized dynamics BSETs often face, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of those working in more racially diverse or predominantly Black schools. Including participants from a wider range of school contexts could illuminate additional factors that influence collegial belonging.

Finally, this study drew from a relatively small, self-selected sample of BSETs. While the qualitative data offer depth and richness, the self-selecting nature of participation may mean that

the teachers most willing to engage were those with particular experiences or perspectives on belonging. As such, the findings should be interpreted within the context of this specific group, and not assumed to represent all BSETs.

Conclusion

This study asked: How are Black special education teachers' sense of collegial belonging shaped by interactions with colleagues? The answer, grounded in participants' reflections and aspirations, is both relational and structural. Collegial belonging was shaped not only by how BSETs were treated, but by whether they and their students were granted access to social, academic, and democratic spaces where connection, contribution, and leadership could occur.. For these educators, belonging was inseparable from their students' dignity. When students with disabilities—often Black students—were recognized as capable learners with a rightful place in the school community, their teachers' legitimacy was affirmed. When students were excluded or diminished, their educators were pushed to the margins as well.

Belonging was fostered when colleagues demonstrated respect, humility, and cultural responsiveness—when they shared information without gatekeeping, extended care without condescension, and built trust through consistent, reciprocal interaction. Yet even the most affirming relationships could not compensate for exclusion from institutional spaces. BSETs' belonging was strongest when they were included in the academic spaces where curriculum and instruction were shaped, the social spaces where collegial rapport was built, and the democratic spaces where decisions were made. Where those opportunities were absent—or racially stratified—belonging became conditional, always at risk of fracture. These moments of unbelonging were not incidental, but reflected enduring structures that have long positioned special education and Black educators at the margins of school life.

To capture the layered nature of these experiences, this study introduced the integrated model of collegial belonging, a framework that brings together psychological, spatial, and justice-oriented dimensions of belonging. By synthesizing the insights of Allen et al. (2021), Louie et al. (2022), and Page et al. (2021) and reinterpreting them through BSETs' lived experiences, the model demonstrates that collegial belonging cannot be reduced to personality traits, informal gestures, or inclusion initiatives. It must be intentionally cultivated through aligned perceptions, relational competencies, shared motivations, and real opportunities to shape the culture, learning, and leadership of schools.

The Black special educators in this study are not waiting to be included. They are already building the kinds of schools where dignity, collaboration, and justice are possible. Yet their work continues within systems shaped by racism, ableism, and other intersecting forms of exclusion that have long gone unchallenged. The question is whether schools are willing to confront the conditions that have made belonging so difficult to sustain. Moving forward requires more than acknowledgement. It demands a transformation of space, a redistribution of power, and a reimagining of practice. It calls on schools to create the conditions to connect, to grow, to collaborate, and to lead—so that belonging is not an exception, but a collective and lasting foundation.

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Table 1

Black Special Education Teachers' Harmful Experiences with Colleagues as Quoted in Past Research

Research Article	Quote
Scott (2020)	"You won't believe the type of abuse I faced by my colleagues whenever I wanted the same treatment for my students…Because I was the special education teacher, they always saw me as lesser than…I just wanted my students to have the same thing that other students had. I got so tired of having to fight for everything...It was just emotionally and mentally draining. It really was" (p. 9).
Scott (2020)	"They [colleagues] would rather kick them out their class and send them to me.....the only Black special education teacher in the building. I was tired of being the dump. I felt like I was the only one who had the patience to help these boys. But at the same time, a person gets fed up and tired of being the dump. That's not what special education is for. That's not what I'm for" (p.10).
Scott (2020)	"My principal would refer to us [the special education teachers] as the other teachers. He would categorize us different than any other teacher in the school building. He would say "those kids" [students with disabilities] or "those teachers" [teachers of students with disabilities]. I was so sick of the abuse" (p. 10).
Scott et al. (2021)	"Majority of the make-up was primarily White women which definitely at times was intimidating and as a practitioner. It discourages me from asking for help and support. Sometimes I go into a place where I had to remind myself that if I was reaching out for help that it wasn't a means of me being inferior or that I was lacking in a particular skill or anything like that. But sometimes it is not as easy for me to ask for help as it is for my colleagues [White colleagues] at times because they all seem to get along and form a community. I don't quite fit in at times" (p. 191).
Cormier (2022)	"You can tell that their relationship [with each other] was totally different [from their relationship with me]. So, they kind of just listened to each other before they listened to me" (p. 97).
Kulkarni et al. (2022)	"Like when you're in those spaces and it's just one race . . . like mostly white people teaching, then it just feels like a herd mentality if you like ever to try to call it out or say something, you know? Like there's this roadblock up from ever being able to do anything because no one takes you seriously…I have a different master's degree, almost got a credential in early childhood special education, and yet, when I go into those spaces, I still feel like it's not enough . . . like somehow the white para has something over me, you know?" (p. 55-56).

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender Identity	Disability Status	Years of Teaching as a Special Educator	Grade Levels Taught and Service Delivery Model	Racial Diversity in Their School
P1	42	Female	No	2	Middle (Inclusive & Resource)	Described some staff of color present, mostly in non-teaching roles
P2	47	Female	No	23	Middle (Inclusive)	Limited diversity
P3	30	Male	No	2	High (Inclusive)	Limited diversity; majority of teaching staff white
P4	62	Female	No	38	Middle (Inclusive)	40% African American; 60% Caucasian
P5	51	Female	No	7	Middle (Self-Contained)	Primarily white; Black and Hispanic teachers
P6	27	Male	No	4	Elementary (Self-Contained)	Highly diverse
P7	50	Female	Yes	10	High (Self-Contained)	Predominantly white educators; limited diversity
P8	34	Female	No	5	Middle (Self-Contained & Push-In)	Pretty diverse overall; three Black special education teachers
P9	50+	Female	No	6	Middle (Inclusive & Resource)	Pretty diverse; Second year that middle school team is African-American/ Mixed
P10	34	Female	No	10	High (Self-Contained; Transition)	Somewhat diverse
P11	31	Female	No	2	Elementary (Inclusive)	More white staff; Principal of color
P12	22	Other	Yes	1	Middle (Inclusive)	Mostly white women; support staff Black; dual-language immersion program (mostly Latinx women)
P13	37	Female	No	7	Elementary	Limited diversity; predominantly

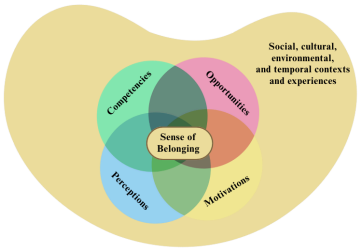
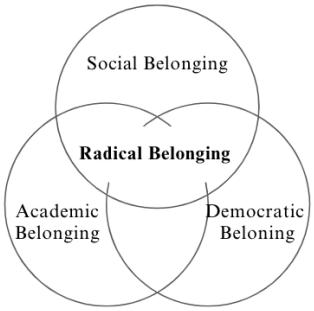
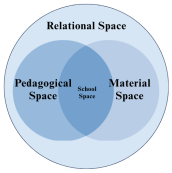
					& Middle (Self-Contained)	Hispanic
P14	52	Female	No	14	High (Self-Contained)	Limited diversity; white women teacher; white men administrators; diversity in special education and support staff
P15	36	Female	Yes	5	Middle & High	Limited diversity; Majority white women educators
P16	54	Female	No	7	Elementary	Somewhat diverse
P17	-	Female	No	7	Middle (Inclusive & Resource)	Limited diversity

Note: Grade levels and racial diversity were summarized from open-ended responses.

Maintained the language participants used to describe the racial diversity in their schools.

Table 3

Frameworks of Belonging: Integrative, Radical, and Spaces of Belonging

Frameworks	Components or Aspects of Belonging
Integrative Framework for Belonging (Allen et al., 2021) 	**Competencies** - having a set of skills and abilities (both subjective and objective) needed to connect and experience belonging. **Opportunities** - the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur. **Motivations** - a need or desire to connect with others. **Perceptions** - a person's subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experiences.
Radical Belonging (Louie et al., 2022) 	**Social belonging** - the feeling of being fully accepted, respected, and supported within a school community. It encompasses a network of caring relationships that fosters mutual support and solidarity among all community members. **Academic belonging** - students, especially those of color, feel genuinely supported and empowered in their learning journey. Emphasis on active, collaborative, and meaningful learning experiences that foster agency and intellectual growth within an anti-hierarchical environment. **Democratic belonging** - the active engagement of all community members, including students and adults, in questioning systemic injustices and collaboratively working towards positive change.
Spaces of Belonging (Page et al., 2021) 	**Material spaces** - are mappable, physical spaces that shape and maintain social patterns. **Relational spaces** - support and encourage social/emotional interactions between people. **Pedagogical spaces** - spaces where learning is expected to take place.

Note: All of the frameworks emphasize that the individual components or aspects of belonging overlap, impact, and reinforce the others, resulting in dynamic frameworks.

Table 4

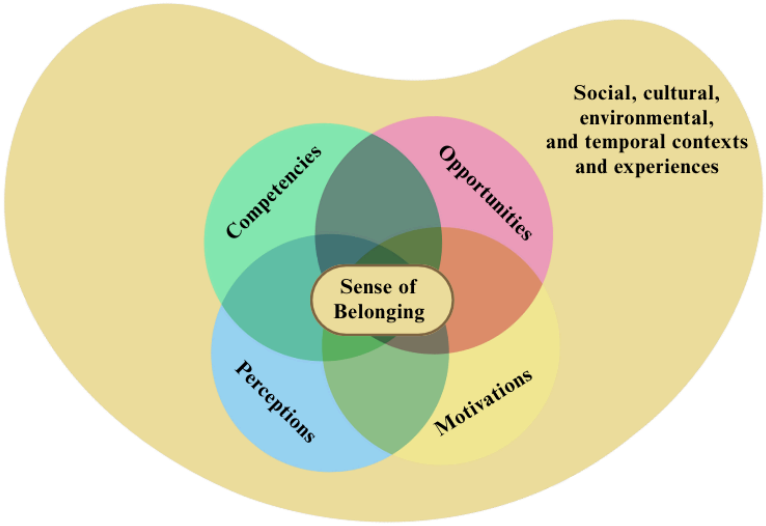
Overview of Themes and Subthemes Related to Black Special Educators' Collegial Belonging

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Sample Quotes
Perceptions	Perceptions of BSETs	How Black special educators are viewed and treated by colleagues.	"My identity and my professional background should be recognized as assets in shaping policies and practices that benefit all students."
	Perceptions of Students	How students with disabilities are perceived, and how those views shape collegial dynamics.	"...celebrating the unique contributions of each teacher and student and creating a culture where diversity is viewed as a strength rather than a challenge."
	Responsibility for Inclusive Practices	How inclusion is understood and enacted by colleagues, including who is seen as responsible for it.	"Colleagues would provide supplements and accommodations according to what is written in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and not rely on the special ed teacher to provide all the accommodations."
Competencies	Relational Practices that Fostered Belonging	Collegial behaviors that supported belonging *Acting with Integrity, Active Listening, Humility, and Reliability & Support*	"I would expect them to communicate with me openly, ask for my input regularly, and not be defensive in their responses if they disagree or feel challenged."
	Relational Practices that Hindered Belonging	Behaviors that strained trust, such as ego, control, and performative behavior	"I am not sure where this ego of being in public education comes from, because we are in service to children, and that requires, in my opinion, being extremely humble."

	Relational Practices Enacted with Students	Ways colleagues engaged (or failed to engage) with students with disabilities	"There are some teachers who are really open, who make it their mission to understand [students'] needs."
Opportunities	Opportunities to Connect	Opportunities for social connection and interpersonal engagement beyond formal roles.	"Staff appreciation, where we can informally connect and celebrate our shared successes, goes a long way in building camaraderie."
	Opportunities to Grow	Access to professional development, mentoring, and feedback that supported growth and inclusion.	"Investing in my professional growth through relevant training or workshops would demonstrate a commitment to my development."
	Opportunities to Collaborate	Instructional collaboration, including co-planning and collective problem-solving.	"I have taken both my caseload kids and kids who are not even on my caseload and worked with them in tandem… That is why I like working with my two math teachers; they allow me to stand up in front of the class and actually teach."
	Opportunities to Lead	Inclusion in decision-making, leadership roles, and shaping school policy and practice.	"rather than, 'Here is your handbook, and here is how behavior works, and here is what we are doing.' It felt like being a part of the conversation and making those choices really helped."

Figure 1

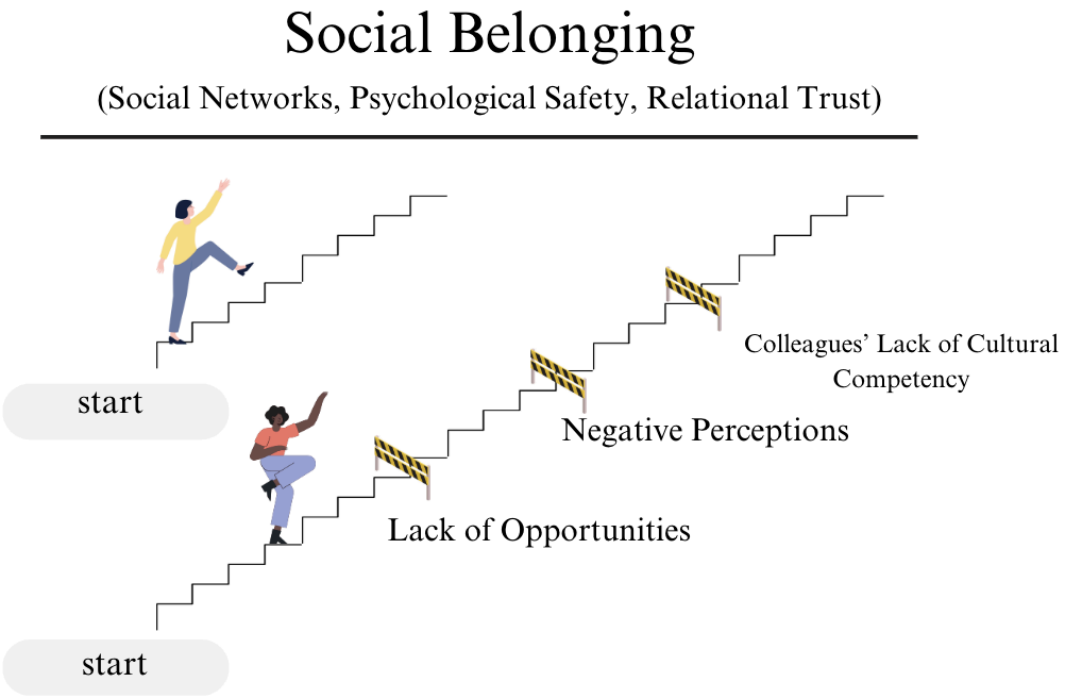
Allen et al. (2021) Integrative Framework for Belonging



Note. An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. Adapted from "Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research," by K. Allen, M. L. Kern, C. S. Rozek, D. M. McInerney, and G. M. Slavich, 2021, *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), p. 92 (https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1890296). Copyright 2021 by Taylor & Francis Group.

Figure 2

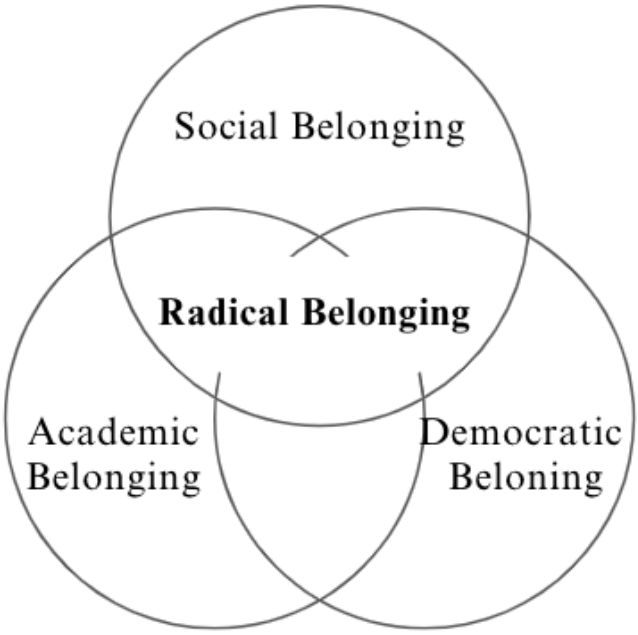
Barriers to Black Special Educators' Social Belonging



Note. This figure illustrates that Black special educators encounter multiple barriers when developing social belonging at school, including a lack of opportunities, negative perceptions, and their colleagues' lack of cultural competency.

Figure 3

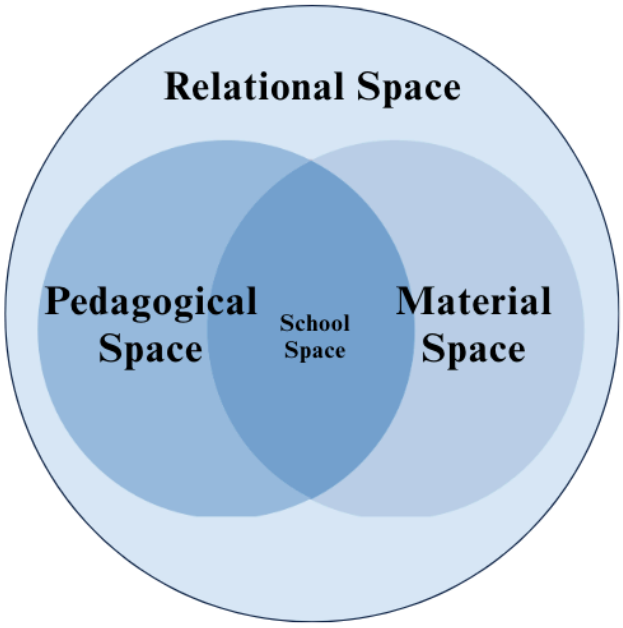
Louie et al. (2022) Radical Belonging Framework



Note. Aspects of radical belonging. Adapted from "Toward radical belonging: Envisioning antiracist learning communities," by N. Louie, L. Roeker, K. Nichols, M. Pacheco, and C. Grant, 2022, *Race, Ethnicity and Education,* 25(1), p. 96 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2021.1910327). Copyright 2022 by Taylor & Francis Group.

Figure 4

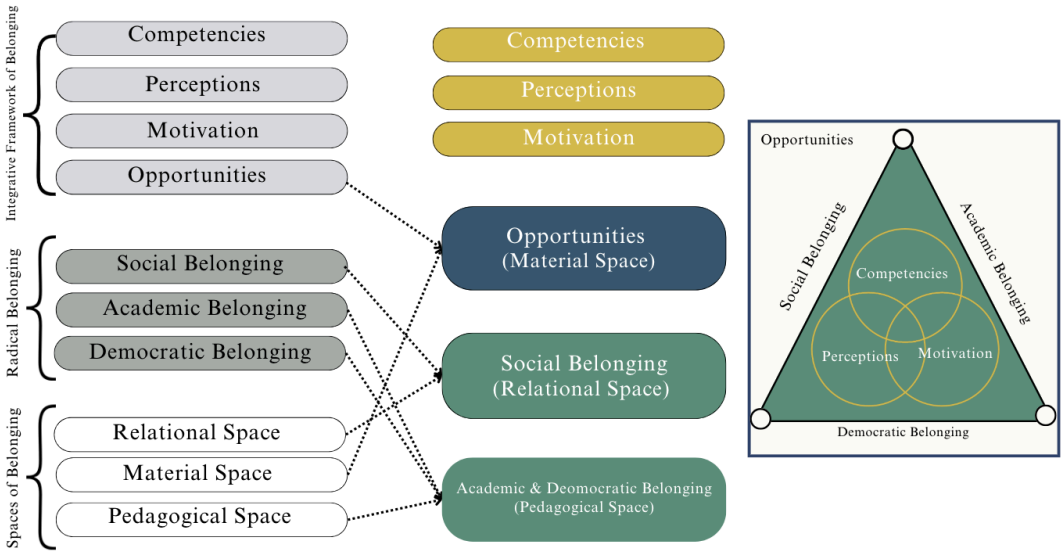
Page et al. (2021) Spaces of Belonging Framework



Note. Spaces of Belonging Framework. Adapted from "Innovative learning environments and spaces of belonging for special education teachers," by A. Page, J. Anderson, and J. Charteris, 2021, *International Journal of Special Education,* 36(1), p. 10 (https://doi.org/10.1080/10300112.2021.1876600). Copyright 2021 by Taylor & Francis Group.

Figure 5

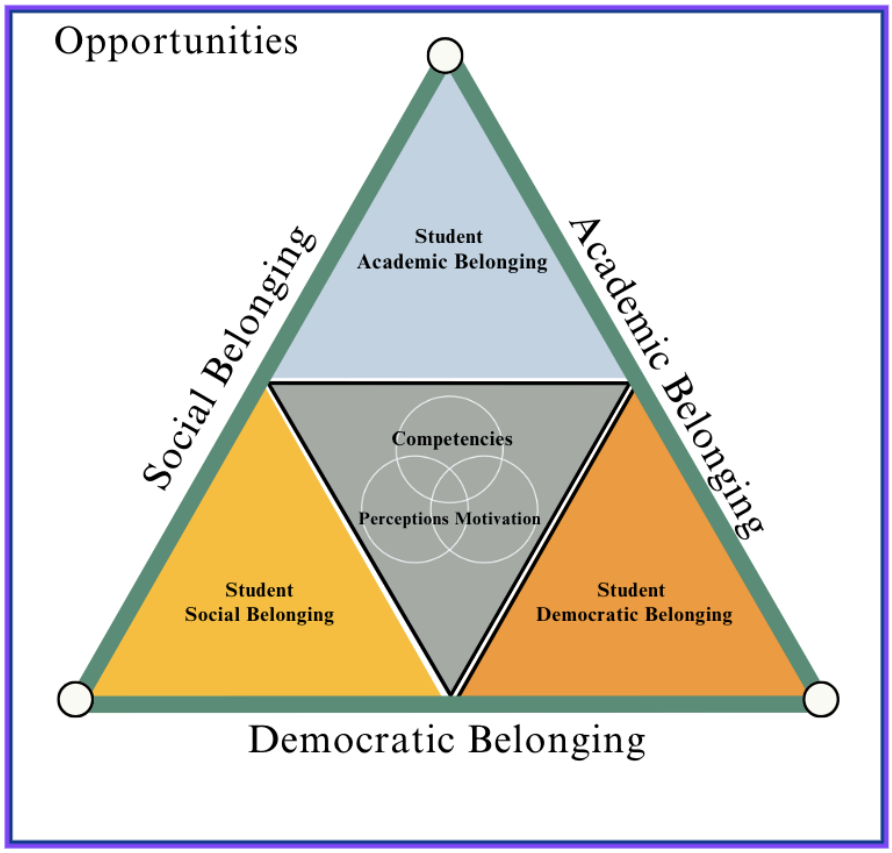
Synthesis of Belonging Frameworks



Note. This figure represents a conceptual synthesis of Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework for belonging, Louie et al.'s (2022) radical belonging, and Page et al.'s (2021) spatial theory of belonging. The dotted lines represent connections across the components.

Figure 6

An Integrated Model of Collegial Belonging



Note. This figure extends the conceptual framework presented in Figure 5 to illustrate how students' social, academic, and democratic belonging are nested within educators' opportunities for social, academic, and democratic belonging. This visual is informed by the integration of frameworks from Allen et al. (2021), Louie et al. (2022), and Page et al. (2021).

Appendix A

Note on Racial Terminology

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term Black rather than *African American* when referring to participants and broader populations within the literature. This decision is intentional and reflects both the language choices of many scholars in education and the need for inclusive and accurate representation.

While *African American* refers specifically to individuals with ancestral ties to the United States, Black is often used as a more expansive and politically conscious term. It encompasses a range of diasporic identities, including individuals of Afro-Caribbean, African immigrant, Afro-Latinx, and multiracial heritage. Because this study centers racialized experiences within U.S. schools but does not limit participation to individuals with U.S.-specific lineage, Black was selected as the most inclusive and contextually appropriate term.

Using Black also aligns with critical race scholarship that emphasizes race as a socially constructed and politically significant category (Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Capitalizing the term affirms the shared sociopolitical realities of those racialized as Black in the U.S. and follows current style guidelines (APA, 2020).

Where applicable, I preserve the language participants used to describe themselves in their own narratives. This practice respects individual identity while maintaining clarity and consistency across the dissertation.

Appendix B

Study Flyer

Appendix C

Eligibility Questionnaire

Eligibility Questionnaire

Before you can participate in this study about special educators' sense of belonging in the workplace, please answer the following questions to confirm your eligibility.

1. Do you identify as a Black special educator?
2. How would you describe your racial identity? (Black, African American, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Caribbean, African descent, Multiracial, Other) You can prefer not to say.
3. Are you currently employed as a special educator?
4. What state(s) do you hold a valid teaching license in?
5. First and Last Name:
6. Preferred Email Address:

What you will be expected to do in this study:

After we confirm your eligibility to participate in this study, you will be emailed a link to another survey. In the survey, you will be asked to respond to this hypothetical story:

Imagine you are scrolling through special educator postings. Something about this school catches your attention. They say all the right things: “We prioritize inclusion, collaborative teaching practices, and strive to make every teacher and student feel valued and respected for their diverse identities.” The words leap off the screen, and you can’t help but wonder, What does that really look like in practice?

Reflecting on your identities and experiences, if you could tell the school exactly what you need to feel valued in a collaborative setting, what would you ask for? What specific actions or supports from your colleagues and leadership would you say are necessary for your voice to be heard, your expertise to be respected, and for you to feel like you truly belong in these collaborative spaces?

When responding:

- Remember that this is a hypothetical story. Even if you do not currently work in a collaborative, inclusive setting, we ask that you imagine that you do and respond accordingly
- You should expect to spend 15-30 minutes writing your ideas (at least 10 lines of text)
- You can write the responses as a paragraph or use bullet points

- Know that you have unlimited time to respond and that your responses is anonymous. We cannot identity the story you wrote because responses will be combined with those of other respondents and reported as a group.

Do you understand what you will be expected to do in this study?

What would you like explained further? What questions do you have about this study?

Appendix D

Qualtrics Survey

Authentication
You will next be asked to authenticate that you have met the inclusion criteria for this study. This allows us to send you the $20 gift card. Your response is still anonymous and we will not be able to identify the story you've written because responses will be combined together with those of other respondents and reported as a group.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON: Consent Form

Doctoral Student Researcher: Aloura Pearson (apearson2@wisc.edu; 920-475-4499)
Principal Investigator: Kimber Wilkerson (klwilkerson@wisc.edu; 608-338-9908)

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you identify as a Black special education teacher in a PK-12 setting. This study aims to explore your perceptions of belonging with colleagues in schools that value inclusion and collaboration. To do so, we ask that you respond to a hypothetical story about special educators' sense of belonging in the workplace. Your response will be confidential. We cannot identify the story you wrote because responses will be combined with those of other respondents and reported as a group. After the research team has analyzed the responses, you may be contacted via email to share your thoughts on the findings.

If you agree to participate, the survey entails reading a short (one-paragraph) passage describing a hypothetical scenario where you are interested in working at a school that values inclusion and collaboration. You will then be prompted to describe what you need from your colleagues and leadership to feel valued in collaborative settings.

How we ensure the confidentiality of research records:
Access to research data will be strictly limited to only approved personnel. Data will be stored on a secure, password-protected server at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Strong, unique passwords will protect all devices and accounts used to access research data (Two-factor authentication will be enabled where possible) Personal identifiers will be removed from the main dataset and stored separately The information collected in this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies. We will destroy the original files with your responses after our analysis is complete or in 7 years, whichever comes first

When completing your written responses:

- Remember that this is a hypothetical story. Even if you do not currently work in a collaborative, inclusive setting, we ask that you imagine that you do and respond accordingly
- You should expect to spend 15-30 minutes writing your ideas (at least 10 lines of text)
- You can write the response as a paragraph or use bullet points
- Know that you have unlimited time to respond and that your response will be confidential

Additional Information About the Study:

- Risks include a potential breach of confidentiality and the possibility that you will reveal personal, sensitive, or identifiable information when responding to the story
- We don't expect any direct benefits from your participation in this study
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time

Who to Contact with Questions:

You may ask questions about the research at any time. If you have questions before you complete the survey, you should contact Aloura Pearson (apearson2@wisc.edu) or the Principal Investigator (my academic advisor), Kimber Wilkerson, at (608-338-9908). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or have complaints about the research study or study team, call the confidential research compliance line at 1- 833-652-2506. Staff will work with you to address concerns about research participation and assist in resolving problems.
By agreeing to participate in this survey, you are indicating your consent. If you agree, you will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Do you consent to participate in this study?

Additional Demographic Questions

How old are you?

What is your gender identity?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary/third gender Transgender
- Cisgender
- Other

Do you identify as having a disability?

- Yes
- No
- Other

Survey Directions
You will now be prompted to write a response to a hypothetical story about workplace belonging. Your response should be at least 10 lines long. Afterward, you will be asked to answer a few additional questions.

Hypothetical Workplace Story
Imagine you are scrolling through special educator job postings. Something about this school catches your attention. They say all the right things: *"We prioritize inclusion, collaborative teaching practices, and strive to make every teacher and student feel valued and respected for their diverse identities."* The words leap off the screen, and you can't help but wonder, What does that really look like in practice?

Reflecting on your identities and experiences, if you could tell the school exactly what you need to feel valued in a collaborative setting, what would you ask for? What specific actions or supports from your colleagues and leadership would you say are necessary for your voice to be heard, your expertise to be respected, and for you to feel like you truly belong in these collaborative spaces?

Your Teaching Experience
How many years have you been a special educator? Please include the year range in your response (e.g., 2014-2024)

What grade level(s) do you currently teach? Where do you primarily teach? (e.g., inclusive setting, self-contained, resource room, etc.)

How would you characterize the overall level of racial diversity amongst the staff at the schools you've taught - highly diverse, somewhat diverse, or limited diversity?

Please describe the racial groups you observed among the educators and support staff at the schools where you've taught. Feel free to be as specific or general as you'd like in your descriptions.

Follow-Up Questions
To what extent, if any, do you feel your racial identity influences your sense of belonging in the workplace? Please explain your perspective.

We may publish the findings from this study. If so, we would like to be able to quote the response you wrote using a pseudonym (a fictitious name). Do you agree to allow us to quote you in publications?

Gift Card

Would you like to receive your $20 gift card? Click Yes Below

Appendix E

Interview Presentation

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Sense of Belonging Interview

Goal: Learn about specific experiences that have contributed to your sense of belonging with colleagues and leaders

ALOURA PEARSON

I'd like to start by sharing key themes we constructed from the collective survey responses...

We gathered from the survey that for BSETs to feel like they belong, they need to be with colleagues and leaders who:

- **Actively advocate for and implement inclusive practices**
- **Create psychological safety by valuing and investing in their funds of knowledge**
- **Acknowledge barriers within the system and work toward dismantling them**

Topics to Discuss:

I. Introductions (5-10 minutes)

Your Story: What led you to become a special education teacher? Do you currently feel like you belong at the school you work at?

II. Review the Preliminary Themes (30-40 minutes)

To what extent do the collective ideas resonate with your experience?

Follow-Up Questions

III. Closing (10 minutes)

Anything surprise you? Anything missing? What else? Where would you like to receive a $20 gift card?

Actively advocate for and implement inclusive practices

Examples: Working with co-workers who speak positively about special education and students who receive services, actively engaging in co-teaching and being devoted to all students' learning, taking initiative to read and collaborate on IEPs and planning with student needs in mind, and including students with disabilities meaningfully

Create psychological safety by valuing and investing in their funds of knowledge

Examples: Working with colleagues who actively seek your input and view your ideas as necessary to creating equitable learning experiences, who acknowledge your contributions as both a Black educator and a special educator, and who want to ensure you have the support you need to excel at your job (mentors, professional development, feedback)

Acknowledge barriers within the system and work toward dismantling them

Examples: Having diverse leadership, culturally responsive curriculum, systems in place for when harm is caused (discrimination, microaggressions), establishing multiple channels (in-person meetings, written opportunities, small groups, etc.) for continuous feedback that ensure all voices are meaningfully represented in school improvement efforts

Is there anything that surprised you or that you believe is missing?

Thank you for taking the time to engage in this interview

Where can I send you a $20 gift card?