LD Label as Negative. Students are labeled as learning disabled (LD) for achievement that is not commensurate with their IQ, so they typically have average or high IQs and the potential to learn. The disproportionate labeling of socially disadvantaged youth, and the potential that placement into special education (being labeled with LD in this case) limits learning opportunities, motivates research on the social or structural factors that are associated with a heightened risk of carrying the label of LD. The predominant use of bivariate analyses or aggregate level data in previous studies of this topic have left the targets for policy reform unclear.

Contextual Variation and Social Comparison. LD diagnostic procedures have been criticized as unstandardized and subjective. Institutionals expect contextual variation in the assignment of the label of LD, and focus on how the processes of assigning the LD label are based in social comparison. Institutionals expect that the base for social comparison, as well as achievement and behavior norms, may vary depending on the composition of school's student bodies. They predict this will result in similar students having different odds of being labeled with LD across schools with different student body compositions, as a result of different standards for acceptable achievement levels.

Race or SES? Labeling theorists argue that the disproportionate labeling of racial minorities can be corrected by stripping referral and diagnostic procedures of racism, while others attribute racial disproportionality to racial differences in material circumstances, and the connections between socioeconomic resources and learning ability. Labeling theorists also expect that racial minorities’ odds of being labeled will be higher in lower minority schools, in which their minority race is more distinctive.

Contributions of this Study. Reducing the incidence of LDs or the labeling of students as LD depends upon empirically establishing the social and structural roots of the label. This study is among the first to use both student and school level measures from a large nationally representative dataset to explore the socio-demographic, academic, and contextual correlates of the label of LD.

Research Questions
1) Do similar high school students have different odds of carrying the label of LD depending on the student body composition of their school?
2) Is racial disproportionality attributable to differences in race or racial differences in material circumstances?
3) Do racial minorities have higher odds of being labeled with LD in lower minority schools where they are more distinctive?

Lack of Standardization (RQ1)
- Figure 1 Results. Significantly higher proportions of students in higher poverty schools have reading test scores in the bottom quartile than in lower poverty schools.
- Figure 2 Results. Among students with test scores in the bottom quartile, significantly higher proportions attending lower poverty schools are labeled with LD than those in higher poverty schools.

Racial Disproportionality (RQ2)
- Figure 3 Results. Figure 3 shows that blacks make up on 0.13 of the American population, but 0.15 of the sample of 10th graders carrying the label of LD. Before 2000, methods like these were commonly used as evidence of racial disproportionality.
- Racial minorities’ lower average SES is well established. Race and class differences in academic achievement are also well established.

Conclusions
- I do find that the label of LD is partially attributable to social and structural factors, rather than neurological factors alone. Students are labeled with LD on the basis of their race, class, and linguistic status, because the primary criteria for being labeled is academic achievement, which is known to vary on the basis of race, class, and linguistic status.
- The process of labeling is not standardized, as institutionalists would predict, with similar students having different odds of being labeled depending on the characteristics of the peers at their school.
- Although racial disproportionality is generally attributable to racial differences in material circumstances rather than labeling theorists’ predicted racist school processes, there is evidence that a racial minority status becomes more salient in labeling decisions in schools with fewer racial minorities.

Data
- Education Longitudinal Study of 2002
- Analytic sample: 11,670 tenth graders in 546 high schools in 2002 – 6% of the sample is labeled with LD
- Utilize data from the base year student and parent surveys, and administrative data describing schools

Racial Minorities in Low-Minority Schools (RQ3)
- Figure 4 Results: The predicted probabilities of carrying the LD label are higher for black and Hispanic adolescents who attend lower minority schools than they are for similar black and Hispanic adolescents at higher minority schools.

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