

The Other Half Hasn't Been Told: African American Males and Their Success in Special Education

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This qualitative case study is aimed at unpacking the schooling experiences and outcomes of African American students, in general, and males in particular, in special education. Findings from this case study demonstrate how one academically successful African American male, diagnosed with an intellectual disability, meets and exceeds school expectations within his general education experience. This case study underscores the significance of listening to students, building strong home-school collaborations, and creating supportive networks as three important ways to better understand and promote student academic performance and outcomes.

Keywords: African American males, special education, behavioral disorder, intellectual disability, adolescence, high school, urban education

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to address the continued disproportionality of African American males identified with disabilities in particular, emotional disturbance and intellectual disabilities, specifically, when compared to all other groups. The authors examined a single case study based on the schooling experiences and learner outcomes of one African American male identified with an intellectual disability. Based on this case study, the authors argue neither general nor special education can serve any student well unless the circumstances under which they are referred, evaluated, identified, and subsequently placed, are examined and rectified.

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Historical Context of African American Males in Special Education

Racial discrimination experienced by African American male students (including immigrant children of African descent in the U.S.) in special education (Blanchett, 2006, 2010; Losen, Hodson, Ee, & Martinez, 2015a) continues to permeate, influence, and impede the screening, identification, placement, learning experiences, and life outcomes as a whole. As a result, these students are often misidentified and over-represented in subjectively defined categories of special education, such as emotional behavioral disorders and learning disabilities (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen et al., 2015a).

In their seminal special education study, Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1982) found that decisions about placement in special education classes more closely reflect social categorizations (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, race, etc.) than student performance data. In another study, Harry & Klingner (2006) determined that referral decisions to assess for a possible emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) diagnosis relies heavily on the classroom teacher's knowledge, perceptions and assumptions. Such a practice is indeed troubling when we consider the fact that the current teacher referral process that initiates special education classification and placement is both idiosyncratic and fraught with inaccuracy (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (this study's research site), a report titled, *A Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, conducted by Hehir, Grindal, and Eidelman (2012) documented a concern over the relatively high numbers (more than 17%) K-12 students with disabilities identified in the state. This rate of identification for special education service eligibility is the second highest in the country, behind Rhode Island at 19%. Hehir and Associates also found that among low-income students with disabilities, African American students in particular, were considerably less likely to be included in general education classes when compared to their White and Asian special education counterparts.

Their study also revealed that approximately 22% of African Americans are students with disabilities claiming that, "student race remained a salient characteristic in predicting educational separation even after controlling for low-income status" (Hehir et al., 2012, p. 26). This study does not indicate whether referral decisions, for example, to assess EBD (referred to as 'emotional impairment' by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and defined in accordance with federal law at 34 CFR §300.7 U.S. Department of Education, 1999), as a student who exhibits inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances is a problem in any one district (e.g., Boston Public Schools); however, current identification practices corroborate the findings of the studies mentioned above, given the disproportionate number of African American male students in special education programs where the misperceptions about them abound in schools and society.

Disparities in schooling outcomes for African Americans increased significantly following the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that to educate students separate from their White counterparts was inherently unequal. The practice of misdiagnosing African Americans as having disabilities led to an exponential increase in the size and scope of special education within segregated settings (Blanchett, 2010; Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015b; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Orfield, 2001). In the years following the *Brown* decision, African Americans were regularly categorized as having mild mental retardation (a highly problematic and now defunct category that has since been renamed as intellectual disabilities), emotional disturbance (Osgood, 2008), and specific learning disabilities (Losen et al., 2015b).

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE SUCCESS

Today, a significant number of African American males are not only over-represented in categories of emotional disturbance, intellectual disabilities, and specific learning disabilities, they are disproportionately subjected to more segregated settings than their peers with disabilities in other racial and ethnic groups combined (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Losen et al., 2015a; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Balfanz and his colleagues identify a troubling intersection of race, disability, and gender for African American males in special education.

In a recent study, Balfanz et al., (2015) analyzed U.S. Department of Education 2009-2010 data from 6000 school districts and determined that 36% of Black male students with disabilities were often suspended for less serious offences (also see Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya, & Hughes, 2015). In another study, Barbarin (2013) found that African American boys are subject to disproportionately high rates of disciplinary action, such as suspensions and expulsions, at an early age. These actions, combined with the ways that Black males are socially and culturally misunderstood, result in misguided school practices that are punitive and disadvantage African American males (Wright, Counsell, & Tate, 2015).

This pervasive problem has further contributed to the delinquency rate observed among Black youth (Schollenberger, 2015), along with academic disengagement (Toldson, McGee, & Lemmons, 2015), heightened risk of dropping out (Marchbanks, Blake, Booth, Carmichael, Seibert, & Fabelo, in press), and increased rates of incarceration (i.e., school-to-prison pipeline) (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Losen et al., 2015a; Malone & Malone, 2015).

The legacy of failure and over-representation of African American males placed in subjective disability categories continues unabated (Blanchett, 2006, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen, et al., 2015a; U.S. Department of Education, 2012; Wald & Losen, 2003). All of this contributes to low graduation rates and lowered employment outcomes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The problem has become so widespread among the nation's major metropolitan cities that the U.S. Department of Education and Justice released recommendations to school districts on how to develop policies and practices that eliminate excessive racial disparities (identified as a discipline gap) that results in severe and inclusionary disciplinary practices in favor of positive behavioral supports (Losen et al., 2015b).

Despite its controversial history, special education better serves many, particularly youth from White, middle class households (Blanchett, 2010; Thurlow, 2015), with greater access to services. The purpose of this study is to raise and challenge a frequently neglected question: What needs to happen for special education to better serve African American males with disabilities? The erroneous “dumping” of African Americans in segregated classrooms (Osgood, 2008) has contributed to the exponential growth in special education (particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s) and persists to this day (Losen et al., 2015b).

Proponents of closing the discipline and achievement gaps contend that closing one gap is interdependent on the other. Ford and Moore (2013) advocate for an “equity-based and culturally responsive approach” (p.1) to teaching. Researchers, in fact, put forth a number of recommendations for effecting change. Toldson, McGee, and Lemmons (2015) identified student disengagement (due in part to hopelessness, depression, toxic stress, and reactions to traumatic events) as a key reason for disciplinary referrals in grades 8 through 10.

To change this trend in outcomes, Toldson et al., (2015) recommend providing African American male students with counseling, recreational therapy, and appropriate academic intervention for reading difficulties. This will require teachers to carefully monitor the disciplinary referral process as a whole. Schiff (2013) promotes restorative justice—a system of reparation that holds individuals who harm others directly accountable by having them identify

the harm they caused to the person they injure and describe the actions they would take to mitigate the harm they caused as a preferred alternative to punitive disciplinary measures and incarceration.

Gregory, Allend, Mikami, Hafen, and Pianta (2015) argue that teacher effectiveness is paramount to changing children's outcomes. They identify a sustained, rigorous, and focused inquiry-based intervention as critical and essential to helping educators assess and revise their interactions with learners (i.e., interpersonal skills). Others warn against quick fixes, even as they, too, promote other empirical instruments, such as *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies* [PATHS] (Osher, Poirier, Jarjoura, Brown, & Kendziora, 2014). The authors of this study agree that changing the current trend of outcomes for African American males with disabilities would require developing the capacity of all educators to adequately address the social and academic needs of their students, regardless of perceived differences.

In light of this history, students who are taught by culturally responsive and skilled special educators who understand special education's sociopolitical and socio-historical context can help to ensure that students do not suffer social isolation and lower self-esteem. The intent of this study is to argue that students thrive when ideologically clear teachers utilize approaches that dismantle egregious practices in special education and hold them to high expectations. Moreover, when teachers listen to African American male students and their insights into what must be done to improve their schooling experience, this has the potential to change their outcomes.

The case study presented in this article is part of a larger study examining the life experiences of high-achieving African American males. The findings of one African American male highlights his ability to succeed in a general education classroom, and demonstrates how culturally responsive education manifests in the experiences and outcomes of a learner with a disability in a high-achieving school.

Nate's (pseudonym) experiences and outcomes as a student with an intellectual disability is antithetical to the typical African American male's experience in special education (e.g., a culture of inferiority, inequitable treatment, achievement and discipline gaps) (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014), as well as the general denial of individual rights for African American males in special education prior to, and since, the passage of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Moreover, Nate's story challenges these deficit-oriented discourses in order to deepen our knowledge of how context shapes adolescence, and in doing so, complicates, humanizes, and foregrounds the experiences of African American male students with or without disabilities.

Challenging the Deficit Framework

One influential philosopher/educator who focused originally on adult literacy (Paulo Freire) challenged the notion of teaching and learning as a neutral process. He worked tirelessly to empower Brazilians from non-dominant groups to challenge and change their own lives through the processes of "reading the word, and the world" (The Freire Institute, 2015). According to Freire (1970, 1998), dominant groups use their power to identify and treat those who are different as inferior. This same deficit-based orientation dominates the field of education in general, and special education in particular and serves to marginalize students with disabilities (Raines, Dever, Kamphaus, & Roach, 2012; Valencia, 2010).

Within such a deficit-based system, African Americans experience a dual jeopardy due to racist ideologies (or even triple jeopardy when poverty intersects with race and disability) that

garner even more restrictive and problematic barriers (Crawford, 2008). Scholars, educational leaders, and policymakers construe special education as an array of services, rather than a physical place (Burns, 2007) that offers individualized support designed to minimize or dismantle the barriers to learning that students with disabilities will otherwise experience in school.

Placement in special education claims to be based on objective referral, unbiased assessment, rigorous evaluation, accurate eligibility determination, appropriate placement for rendering services, and a plan for students to exit the system when services are no longer required (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). However, the process has failed to work in the way it was intended for many whose experiences are still burdened by biased judgment and inequitable treatment that continually thwart their academic, intellectual, and economic potential.

Special education's deficit ideology is based on a number of factors, including entrenched pseudoscientific theories that define intelligence as innate (see e.g., Burt, 1973; Galton, 1865). The term, ideology, refers to systems of ideas that are "endorsed and maintained by dominant social groups and show up in cultural practices and symbols" that mirror how people think, speak, and act (Thompson, 1985 as cited in Crawford and Bartolomé, 2010). These systemic ideas are often unconsciously accepted as "commonplace," or hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971). What makes the culture of special education problematic in general (and for African Americans in particular) is that it over-emphasizes the "medical (deficit) model," which conflates racial identity with deficit thinking that, in turn, negatively impacts African American males with disabilities as incapable of learning and achieving at high levels.

A Theoretical Framework of Empowerment

In spite of the aforementioned attitudinal barriers, academic success is possible when African American males are taught within culturally responsive and nurturing school settings. Drawing on sociocultural theory and culturally responsive education, this article presents a case study of one high-achieving African American male (Nate), who refused to allow his intellectual disability diagnosis to become an impediment, deterrent, or prognosis to his own academic success and life outcome.

Sociocultural Theory and Culturally Responsive Education

Sociocultural theory (Nasir & Hand, 2006) examines how people use cognition, communication, and action (practices) to gain a deeper understanding of how "culture is both carried by individuals and created in moment-to-moment interactions with one another as they participate in (and reconstruct) cultural practices" (p. 450). Framing culture in this way provides a critical lens to deeply examine the local production of culture as it is enacted in moments of school life within one urban pilot high school that has figured out how to respond to the social and academic needs of an African American male student diagnosed with an intellectual disability. Nate's story highlights the interplay between self-identity and motivation as an African American male student (diagnosed with a disability) determined to succeed, and the social context of home and school as central to teaching, learning, and schooling.

Social interaction is a fundamental theme of sociocultural theory and is needed to maximize an individual's cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). So, too, is the constructed social context that either allows for, or impedes, social interaction between the different social

actors (students and adults). The social context includes the behaviors and practices of the student, his parent, and teachers who engaged him with high expectations. This study demonstrates how Nate constructed meaning in tandem with his mother and teachers to achieve school success. To better explicate these behaviors, the authors draw upon culturally responsive education specifically (Gay, 2013; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) due to its interrelatedness (sociopolitical consciousness) with sociocultural theory. Culturally responsive education provides a framework for deconstructing sociopolitical consciousness in ways that allow us to analyze the extent to which students' lived experiences influence their social, emotional, and intellectual well-being.

Culturally Responsive Education

Culturally responsive education, at its best, is liberating for both learners and educators (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Sleeter, 2012). The term 'liberatory' is used here to mean the provisions (accommodations and modifications) made to empower students to resist oppression by engaging students in activities that help them to creatively utilize a variety of mechanisms (e.g., critical reflections, analytical skills, knowledge and transactional experiences relevant for everyday living in any community, and conceptual knowledge) to make sense of information and situations while providing them with practical strategies that prepare them to become more adept at engaging in one-to-one communication with others in a process of deliberative justice (Counsell & Boody, 2013).

Culture is used in this context to capture both the tangible aspects (e.g. art, crafts, food, technology, etc.) and the more important intangible filters (e.g., one's values, beliefs, expectations, assumptions, etc.) that help people make sense of their world (Gay, 2013). In this sense, cultural differences account for the greatest variability (or diversity) among people. Yet, very rarely is it taken directly into account beyond consideration of a student's race and language in schools. Teachers who are cultural translators attend to their students and fully utilize relevant cultural referents as a starting point for learning. Culturally responsive education leads to higher order tasks, such as inquiry, critique and analysis and further raises students' intellectual curiosity and subsequent academic potential (Gay, 2013).

Gay (2013) asserts the power of culturally responsive education is demonstrated by educators' capacity to not only "care *about*," but more importantly, to "care *for*" their students' psychological, social, emotional and intellectual success. The latter, she proposes, "manifests in teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students' human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities" (p. 49). In fact, one may likely witness that such a teacher; (a) treats students with integrity; (b) holds them in high esteem; (c) expects much from them; (d) engages them in multilayered learning experiences; and (e) creates opportunities for them to access and express themselves in ways that help them accomplish their goals. Teachers who "care for" their students not only have a thorough understanding of the sociocultural contexts within which they engage with students, they likewise possess the political savvy needed to help students make connections between the social, personal, and moral behaviors with values from which they derive personal satisfaction needed to sustain public and ethical accountability (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Gay, 2013).

Methods

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE SUCCESS

The aim of this case study was to document the experiences of one African American male student (Nate) diagnosed with an intellectual disability and who succeeded academically in large part because of the collaborative relationship between his adoptive mother and the teachers at his high school. The use of qualitative methods (case study approach specifically) provides an appropriate way to capture and understand the ways of knowing (meaning making) used by Nate to better understand his successful schooling experience. This approach involves in-depth interviews, on-going observations, and constant review and analysis of public records of students' outcomes (Yin, 2003).

Participants

Nate was recruited from a larger study of high-achieving African American males (Wright, 2007). As the only high achieving African American male participant with an intellectual disability, Nate was selected for further investigation and analysis. The school's (Success Academy) high-achieving designation either (a) highlights what might be possible when special education better serves African American males, particularly those identified with intellectual disabilities or (b) challenges the over-representation and misdiagnosis of African American males as intellectually disabled.

Setting

Success Academy (pseudonym) served predominantly African American and Latino students. Sixty-one percent of the student body participated in either free or reduced lunch. Success Academy (SA) maintained a nurturing and supportive environment that utilized a personalized approach in which every student was known by name. The teaching faculty was comprised of highly qualified teachers licensed in their assigned content areas who set high academic expectations for all students. For example, in 2010, 98% of SA's students passed the English Language Arts and Math high-stakes tests (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). In 2006 and 2010, well over 90% of the graduating class went to college in comparison to 63% of graduating students across the district, that resulted in over \$1,000,000 in scholarships and financial aid (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011-2012).

Procedures

Consent to interview was obtained from the school (teachers), parent, and student. Interviews, which included four 60-minute semi-structured interviews and one 60-minute focus group interview was the primary data source. These data resulted in descriptive narrative accounts of the participants. Interviews were conducted both at school and in Nate's home. The participants understood that their participation was optional and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Analysis

Using a matrix approach, the initial examination of data was organized into categories on the basis of themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews and observations (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). Individual strands of data were compared and contrasted in order to capture and reveal significant patterns and trends. Only passages and themes that were highlighted for continued examination were analyzed using sociocultural theory (ST) and culturally responsive education (CRE). ST and CRE were used to identify themes and patterns that demonstrate ways of knowing (meaning making) used by Nate to better understand his successful schooling experience. The findings' objectivity is enhanced when multiple individuals are used for coding data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this reason, the researchers completed a wave of coding and cross referenced their interpretations to increase the reliability of the codes used in this study.

Case Study Findings

Nate, a rising senior of average height and weight, with brown eyes, and short brown hair was painfully shy and well mannered - characteristics that might easily allow him to go unnoticed in a large high school. He was a valued, academically successful student, as evidenced by his 3.5 GPA and above-average performance in the areas of English Language Arts and Math on the district's high-stakes test.

Like the average teenager his age, Nate enjoyed listening to hip hop, rhythm and blues (R&B), reggae, and especially rap music: "I like to listen to rap mostly, because it sounds good, and I just like the way it fits me and stuff, like I can relate to this music." Nate's explanation for why he liked rap, seemed to suggest, not only did he enjoy the beat, he also analyzed the words and thinks about their relevance to his life. In addition to Nate's taste in music, his teachers and peers noticed his preppy style of dress. On any given school day, he could be seen in the halls or in his classroom dressed in either a polo or a buttoned-down shirt that he wore outside of khaki pants or jeans. To complement his attire, he wore the latest name-brand sneakers or shoes.

Identified Disability

In 1987, Nate was born addicted to heroin, cocaine, and other barbiturates. He spent the first three weeks of his life in an intensive care unit (ICU), and was immediately labeled as having borderline intellectual disabilities due to developing evidence of assumptions of low cognitive abilities. Intellectual disabilities, referred to as an 'intellectual impairment' in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, is defined as the permanent capacity for performing cognitive tasks, functions, or problem solving that is significantly limited or impaired, and is exhibited by more than one of the following: (1) a slower rate of learning; (2) disorganized patterns of learning; (3) difficulty with adaptive behavior; and/or (4) difficulty understanding abstract concepts (Hehir, Grindal, & Eidelman, 2012).

As he struggled for life amid this identified disability, his birth mother was not prepared to assume parenting responsibility for her son, and therefore, turned him over to the state for adoption. At just three years of age, Nate was adopted by Nancy (pseudonym) despite the medical uncertainty regarding his potential neurological damage. Aware of the premature judgments made about drug-exposed babies, Nancy was determined that her child would not be stigmatized and viewed through the lens of the "crack baby syndrome" (and the assumptions that go with this newborn medical condition).

Nate was diagnosed as nonverbal due to the effects of being born drug-exposed. Consequently, when Nate entered school, he was placed in a classroom with highly verbal children to help promote and support his verbal skill development (unlike the traditional

segregated settings that is predominate for African American males). Nate also received other services outlined in his Individualized Education Plan/Program (IEP). It is important to note here that due in large part to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) the researchers were not allowed access to the details of Nate's IEP provisions for accommodations or modifications (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99). Thus, the determination of services could only be gauged according to the information his mother shared during her interview.

Nate's IEP

While Nate developed verbally, he experienced difficulties with listening and processing information. Children with auditory processing disorders have difficulty listening, comprehending, and making sense of complex information (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). While the researchers did not have direct access to Nate's IEP, his behavior and performance were consistent with children who experience central auditory processing difficulties. This diagnosis was further supported by his mother and teachers' anecdotal accounts. Nate's processing ability and performance appeared to be approximately half of the auditory performance demonstrated by his age-mates.

For this reason, according to his mother, Nate's IEP specified that he must be provided with additional time to process, understand information and complete assignments. For example, Nate was required to have written and verbal instructions in order to fully access the lesson or activity as well as verbal prompts from his teachers to participate in class. In addition to Nate's processing issues, he was also diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for which he received medication. Although the authors find this diagnosis highly problematic, this is not a central theme in Nate's case study nor did it impede his school success.

A Mother's Advocacy And Her Son's Determination

Determined to raise a well-adjusted child, Nancy became an advocate for children with special needs, and rightly so, given her son's unique challenges. Aware of the disproportionate numbers of African American children, especially boys, in special education, Nancy made it a point of staying current with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), the federal law that guides and informs special education policies, procedures, and services.

Nancy's advocacy on Nate's behalf, as well as his own desire not to be separated or treated any differently than students without a disability, empowered him to work hard to develop the confidence needed to attain school success. Since birth, Nate has grown and developed at an impressive rate that far exceeded the expectations of many. In fact, Nate's learning and developmental rate should have called into question and challenged the validity and accuracy of his intellectual disability diagnosis by his teachers and special education experts. He achieved honor roll status, participated in a variety of sports, and earned an impressive array of academic and athletic trophies and certificates. The measure of Nate's success is three-prong based on: (a) his intellectual capacity, (b) the advocacy of his mother and his teachers, who possessed a clear ideological framework (Bartolomé, 2008) and, lastly, (c) a strong home-school collaboration nurtured by his mother and teachers.

A Nurturing School For Nate

Finding Success Academy, according to Nate's mother, contributed significantly to his success in school. She explained that she had been searching for an intimate school that would not place her son "at risk" of school failure, based solely on the belief that "young African American males are culturally and psychologically damaged" (Scott, 1997, p. 21), which maybe a result in lower academic expectations and limited access to challenging academic curriculum. Such a belief is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, "the notion that African Americans are damaged has been employed to justify *de jure* racial discrimination and racial integration, respectively" (Scott, 1997, p. 21). These notions typically cloud the reality that schools can be places of isolation, where African American students are labeled and experience identity problems based on stereotypes and lowered expectations (Wright, 2011). Contrary to this reality, Nate was placed in one of the least restrictive environments at his school – a regular classroom, and his experience at Success Academy ran counter to many other African American males in special education. When asked why he thought he was successful in school, he explained:

If they [teachers] see me struggling, they'll give me extra help or some more time 'cause I have a[n] IEP. My teachers are always telling me how smart I am, and they challenge me in class by giving me advanced work because they know I want to go to college. [Be] 'cause they treat me like other students, I don't feel bad when I have to get more help on a math problem or more time for reading. I know they want me to do good.

The support, according to Nancy, was consistent since his ninth-grade year at Success Academy. She credited the administration and teachers for being cognizant of her son's educational, social, and cultural needs. In fact, when Nate was asked to share how his teachers showed him they were proud of him, he said this:

First of all, they tell me that I'm doing good and sometimes, they tell me that they're proud of me. And when I get a reward, just like last year when I did good on the [State Test] practice one, I got a movie ticket, a free movie ticket. Getting rewards and stuff like that makes me feel really good, and not like I'm different or something from other students.

To summarize, data from this case study provides examples of what teachers and students stand to gain when special education in particular, and general education as a whole, functions as it was intended – as a catalyst for children's success by minimizing, or at best, eliminating the barriers that children face during learning – and not as a place grounded in erroneous beliefs that thwart children's development. Regardless of whether the service provided included such accommodations as extending teachers' wait-time, what Nate and his mother identified as significant was the relationship that she had with Nate's teachers, and the social learning context that facilitated a spirit of collaboration, which governed the way they operated together.

Discussion

Sharing Nate's case study is important because African American males in education in general, and special education in particular, are rarely presented as examples of high achieving

learners. Moreover, “urban youth of color are often absent from normative theories of adolescent development or are depicted as deviant and pathological” (Knight, 2014, p. 434). For these reasons, the authors of this study intentionally selected a student diagnosed with an intellectual disability who was actively engaged in his learning and academic success. He worked alongside students without disabilities in a general education classroom setting, which allowed him to meet and exceed his school’s academic expectations well beyond the restrictions and limitations of his diagnosis. For example, not only did he perform well on the state’s high-stakes test, he also maintained a relatively high GPA that placed him consistently on the honor roll for the entire school year; further evidence that draws question to the accuracy of his diagnosis.

Nate’s school success demonstrates how students diagnosed with intellectual disabilities tend to have more to overcome because of attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about their intellectual prowess. Such beliefs tend to reduce or limit the expectations of what students like Nate can be (life outcomes) and what they can do (capability). In the case of Nate, his disability is further complicated by his race and gender; two factors that tend to circumscribe the schooling experiences of African American males in our nation’s schools (Wright et al., 2015). As previously mentioned, Nate’s counter-narrative as a student diagnosed with an intellectual disability who successfully negotiates and navigates the schooling context of general education is absent from the social science research and rarely cited as a profile of a successful student. This is especially true in the case of African American males who have been diagnosed with such disabilities as emotional behavioral disorders and other learning disabilities.

Nate’s story is a counter-narrative of how special (and general) education can work to greatly improve and increase learner and life outcomes using a culturally responsive approach that is responsible to the whole child –emotional, cognitive, social, and linguistic development. Nate’s story like, Ford and Milner (2005) maintain, supports the importance of listening to students as the most effective way to determine what must be done to ensure that the context of school is culturally responsive and their education is “relevant, meaningful, personal, and empowering” (p. 24). This quote underscores the belief that “nothing about us, without us.” In other words, you can not change attitudinal barriers that shape the schooling context and improve the education of students, in general, African American male students in particular, without listening to them and their perceptions of their schooling experience.

Attitudinal barriers continue to be one of the major impediments to children’s success in special (and general) education. When it comes to African American males, the stakes are even higher. In fact, the academic success for African American children in special education is an anomaly. This article illustrates that the opportunity of academic success for African Americans in special education increase when teachers work in concert with caregivers to counter the inherited socio-historical and political legacies that African American students routinely face and endure in special education. Of particular note is the sociopolitical consciousness of the adults in this study (Nate’s mother and his teachers), the culturally responsive learning contexts (Success Academy) they created for Nate, their mindfulness of the barriers that prevent school success, and the provision of tools that learners need to confront and reframe their educational experiences.

The power of sociocultural theory underscores the fact that every aspect of children’s social and cultural development appears at the social level – or in context with others – and then manifests later at the individual level. This case study, in particular, demonstrates how important it is for teachers to ensure that students are active learners and parents are understood as collaborators and advocates who can help shape the context in which children are expected to

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE SUCCESS

learn. Moreover, shared experiences provide students the opportunity to communicate their needs and internalize a number of higher order thinking skills that can help solidify their academic success. This case study suggests that teaching African American males with disabilities in a holistic manner requires educators to use diverse strategies that superimpose culturally responsive education in classrooms with such students.

Further, when barriers implicate broader social issues, and they usually do, it is the teacher's responsibility to collaborate with caregivers in order to help students develop the emotional and intellectual stamina (determination and perseverance) needed to think through and surmount the challenges they face. According to the schooling experiences and outcomes of Nate, the advocacy of his mother, and engagement by his teachers represented in his case study, it is recommended that special educators engage in the following practices:

1. Examine current systems of thinking used to govern thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and the social and political assumptions that others make about African American males, particularly as it pertains to planning and implementing curricula (Aaronson & Laughter, 2015; Wright et al., 2015);
2. Build and support mutually respectful relationships with African American males, their families, and experts in ways that promote responsibility, care, respect, and a wealth of educational possibilities (Wright et al., 2015);
3. Engage in professional development trainings that provide important access to evidence-based tools that enable educators with repeated opportunities to continuously reflect on teacher actions, interactions, and practices in order to uncover and minimize the barriers that African American males face in today's world (Aaronson & Laughter, 2015; Sleeter, 2012; Wright, 2009; Wright et al., 2015) and in special (and general) education;
4. Be steadfast in providing African American males diagnosed with disabilities full access to high-quality curricular experiences and academic content that helps them derive and ground knowledge acquisition appropriately in order to achieve greater academic, social, and economic advancement; and finally,
5. To question and challenge the potential misdiagnosis of African American males as having disabilities.

These five recommendations necessitate the urgent need for educators (both general and special) to develop keen understandings about the social intersection of race, disability, and instructional practices and how that intersection can impact learning and life outcomes for individuals diagnosed with disabilities. Implementation of these recommendations can further lead to new insights into how to better support, engage, and understand the social, emotional and intellectual development of African American males, in both special and general education settings.

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