"These People Are Never Going to Stop Labeling Me": Educational Experiences of African American Male Students Labeled with Learning Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This investigation employs Disability Critical Race Studies as a theoretical framework to determine the interdependence of racism and ableism in school settings. African American male students with learning disabilities are queried about their interpretations of special education placement and labeling while attempting to secure educational opportunities during high school. Their responses were used to determine the consequences of labeling as they intersect with factors such as race, gender and, to a lesser extent, social economic status. Subsequently, as a result of this investigation, implications for empowering students through self-advocacy and enhancing teachers' knowledge of diverse learning styles are discussed.

Researchers have documented extensively the disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special education (Blanchett, 2006; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; National Research Council, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006). Indicators also demonstrate, more specifically that, African American, Latino and Native American students are at the highest risk of being labeled with a disability. More specifically in educational settings, African American students represent approximately 17.13% of the total public school population, while they account for more than 26% of the children served in special education classrooms (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Hannes, 2011) and African American male students represent only 9% of the total school age population. Yet, they constitute a third of the students in public schools labeled with an intellectual disability. In the categories of learning disability and emotional disturbance, African American males are disproportionately represented, accounting for 12% and 21% respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Current educational statistics display evidence of disproportionate and significant educational failures for African American male students. More alarming, quantitative depictions of disproportionality of African American males in special education can be characterized as an epidemic catastrophe. However, thorough examination of special education literature indicates that very few studies have focused on determining, from these students' perspectives, the confluence of gender, racial/ethnic, and disability identities within their educational experience (Connor, 2008; Petersen, 2006; 2009; West-Olatunji & Baker, 2006).

Many scholars have investigated factors contributing to the disproportionate number of African American students in special education. Some researchers focus on historical trends in special education (Ford, 2012; Skiba et al., 2006), others elect to explore the potential of building continuity between teachers and students (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008), and a number of researchers examine the absence of instructional rigor within special education classrooms (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Sullivan &

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Bal, 2013). Each methodological approach has the possibility of contributing to broader understandings of disproportionality in special education. Nonetheless, individuals who have experienced significant educational inequalities in the American education structure may have differing perspectives that may prove beneficial in formulating their educational intervention (Frank, 2013). Exploring the consequences of disproportionality through the authentic voice of African American male students allows researchers and practitioners to establish a more nuanced understanding of disproportionality through the consideration of multiple perspectives (Frank, 2013). Further, the collective narratives of African American male students labeled with learning disabilities remind us to question what we know about the educational experiences of students of color who are attempting to secure the educational promise of a "good life in a pluralistic democratic society" (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 200).

The purpose of this qualitative investigation, therefore, is to better understand the educational experiences of African American male students labeled with learning disabilities as described in their own words. The students' understandings and experiences in self-contained and inclusive classrooms were documented as they provided reflective interpretations of their K-12 educational experiences. The interviews were informed by qualitative methodologies grounded in Disability Critical Race Studies, a theoretical framework that acknowledges the interdependence of critical race theory and disability studies in education (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2012). By investigating the educational experiences of African American male students, we gain insight into their collective narratives about how they interpret being raced and gendered in schooling experiences as well as their categorization as students labeled with disabilities. Moreover, their narratives provide insight into how African American male students who willfully resist deleterious stereotypes resulting from labeling then chose to successfully navigate the unintentional pitfalls of their various school environments.

Brief overview of disproportionality

Although the disproportionate number of African American students identified with disabilities has become a major theme in recent special education literature, the dilemma is not new. An extensive body of scholarship surrounding *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) documents the educational inequities that have historically affected African American students in schools in the United States for more than 50 years. Following the *Brown v. Board* desegregation decision, special education ostensibly became an alternative avenue to segregate African American students based on presumed academic, psychological, and cultural deficits (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Harry & Klinger, 2006). Connor and Ferri (2005) reported that following the *Brown* decision, Washington D.C. public school officials designated 24% of the school system's newly admitted African American students as students with special needs. Consequently, African American students came to represent 77% of the special education population (Connor & Ferri, 2005). Landmark legal cases followed, including *Larry P. v. Riles* (1979), in which the court decided in favor of the plaintiffs who claimed the over-representation of African American students in classes for learners with intellectual disabilities was a result of inappropriate standardized intelligence quotient (IQ) testing, assessment practices, and teacher bias. *Diana v. Mills* (1970/1973), a legal case in which it was determined that Mexican American students were erroneously placed in special education, provides additional evidence of the confounding intersection of race/ethnicity and disability in public schools.

Due to this continuous trend, researchers and civil rights advocates contend that the disproportional representation of African American students in special education is a "potential violation of educational opportunity and an obstacle to educational equity in the education of all students" (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011, p. 2234). For instance, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) is an example of federal legislation that extends upon the principles of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) due to its established mandates for the inclusion of students with disabilities in the least restrictive educational environment (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Blanchett, 2006; Connor, 2008; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). Nevertheless, these promises remain elusive for African American students with disabilities. Lending support to this argument are the numerous examples of differential outcomes

for European American, middle-class suburban youth labeled with disabilities. Research findings offer examples that demonstrate that European American, middle-class students with disabilities are educated in more inclusive settings with the general education population, receive extensive support services, and are more likely to receive accommodations for qualifying college entrance examinations (Connor, 2008; Pellegrino, Sermons, & Shaver, 2011; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). In contrast to potentially encouraging outcomes for European American, middle-class students with disabilities, African American students labeled with disabilities are more likely to be placed in highly restrictive educational settings (National Research Council, 2002), less likely to be exited from special education once identified as having a disability (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinder, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azzis, 2006) and are more likely to experience poor quality educational instruction within special education settings (Skiba et al., 2006). This historical dilemma suggests that there is a need to "look behind the special education ontological, epistemological, and axiological 'curtain'" (Patton, 1998, p. 30) in order to bring to center stage the voices of African American students with disabilities. Moreover, the perspectives of these students offer the occasion for general and special education personnel to critically analyze the power structures that influence common sense assumptions and deconstruct the complexities of race and disability stereotypes that undergird daily educational occurrences (Annamma et al., 2012; Frank, 2013).

Disability critical race studies

Disability critical race theory (DisCrit) is an emerging theoretical framework that analyzes the interdependence of racism and ableism. DisCrit acknowledges that race and disability are social constructs rooted in dominant notions of normalcy where deviations from White, middle-class, able-bodied norms are viewed as socially subordinate identities (Annamma et al., 2012; Ferri, 2010). Dominant narratives surrounding race often characterize students of color as less intelligent and undervaluing education, which reinforces the erroneous notion that "academically poor students" may be identified by their socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Simultaneously, ableism—a system of oppression that privileges able-bodied people and culture at the expense of individuals with disabilities—creates discourse in which individuals with disabilities are characterized as pathological and considered an economic burden to society (Linton, 1998).

Drawing on the dominant historical rhetoric in the United States about race and disability there is evidence of how these social markers have been utilized as justification for exclusion and segregation from White, middle-class, able-bodied students in the general education classroom (Connor & Ferri, 2005). As a consequence, proponents of DisCrit propose to emphasize the ways in which institutionalized racism and ableism impact students of color qualitatively differently than their White counterparts. Annamma et al. (2012) write:

> We believe that students of color who have been labeled with disabilities live in the same complex world where they do not fit neatly into any one category. However, for students of color, the label of dis/ability situates them in unique positions where they are considered "less than" white peers with or without dis/ability labels, as well as their non-disabled peers of color. In brief, their embodiment and positioning reveals ways in which racism and ableism inform and rely upon each other in interdependent ways. (p. 5)

Given that the aim of DisCrit, as well as other critical theory, is to disclose and disrupt the ways in which marginalized groups are systemically oppressed, it is increasingly more difficult to ignore the lived experiences of students, such as students of color with disabilities, who experience multiple marginalities.

The theoretical objectives of DisCrit were applied to this investigation to examine the ways in which race/ethnicity, gender, and disability influence the learning chances of African American males with learning disabilities. The research questions guiding this investigation include: In what ways do African American males labeled as students with learning disabilities perceive that race/ethnicity, gender, and disability status impact their opportunity to learn? In what ways do African American males labeled as students with learning disabilities perceive self-contained classrooms—segregated classrooms designated for students labeled with exceptional learning needs—as a benefit or limitation to their opportunity

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Student name	Type of high school	Time of identification
Albert	Suburban public	High school
Carter	Urban public	Elementary school
Edward	Urban public	High school
Gregory	Suburban public	Elementary school
Johnathan	Urban private	Elementary school
Jackson	Urban public	Elementary school
Michael	Urban public	Elementary school

to learn? By focusing on participants' personal narratives as students of color labeled with disabilities, this qualitative research study "gives voice to people who have been historically silenced or marginalized" (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 199) in the educational literature on disproportionality.

Methods

Participants

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study that examined the K-12 educational and post-secondary transition experiences of African American male college students with disabilities and what compels them to pursue a college education despite the master narrative that characterizes African American males and individuals with disabilities as academically inferior (Blanchett, 2006; Ferri, 2010; Harper & Davis, 2012). Seven participants met the established criteria for this study.

Each participant in this specific investigation was an African American male student, labeled with at least one learning disability who was attending a four-year historically Black mid-Atlantic university. Each participant was originally contacted by the director of disability support services. Participants had a history of academic support from disability support services and documentation to substantiate their learning disability. The objective of the study was to have participants reflect upon their previous school experiences as a student with disabilities, therefore, participants in this investigation were students identified with learning disabilities during elementary or high school. Participants completed high school in a variety of settings, including an urban self-contained school for students with mild learning disabilities, large mid-Atlantic public schools, and one student completed high school in a midsized rural school in the mid-Atlantic region (Table 1). Participants had a mean age of 23 years with a range of 19–28 years of age. Participants successfully completed at least one semester of course work and were enrolled in college-level courses during the time of the interviews.

Data collection

Semi-structured phenomenological interviewing was the primary means of data collection for this study. This line of inquiry was selected to ensure that through dialogue and reflection the quintessential meaning of the participants' experiences would be revealed (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). African American male students identified with disabilities participated in three 90-minute one-on-one interviews. Participants were asked to reflect upon their schooling experiences as it related to the intersectionality of disability labels, race/ethnicity identity, and gender in academic environments. The open-ended questions included the following sample questions:

1. When were you first identified as having a disability?
2. Do you believe the disability label is accurate? Why? Why not?
3. What experiences have you had as African American student with a disability?

Each interview was recorded on an Echo SmartPen, which allowed the researcher to create audio recordings and maintain an analytic memo simultaneously.

It was important to determine the meanings that participants attributed to standardized1 test scores. Therefore, participants' most recent Woodcock Johnson-NU scores and college grade point averages were collected for triangulation and discussion within the study.

Data analysis

The data collection and data analysis processes were iterative; data were collected and analyzed simultaneously (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple listenings of the recorded interviews were conducted by the researcher prior to the analysis of readings and the coding of the interview transcriptions (Gilligan & Brown, 1992). The multiple listenings allowed for convergence of themes within and across interviews (Siedman, 2005). This method also assisted in the identification of areas in need of more clarification. Ongoing coding and interview data analysis resulted in emergent themes that were retained or eliminated based upon their reoccurrence. For example, if the student stated that their educational experience was "not that good" this was coded as a limiting opportunity to learn. On the other hand, comments that indicated that "teachers in separate classroom [for students with disabilities] helped out a lot" were coded as benefit to self-contained settings. The data also were analyzed using word analysis within Nvivo to determine students' use of various terms including, but not limited to, self-contained, disability, race/ethnicity, and gender. The analysis of the results was shared with a peer debriefer who had extensive experience working with students with disabilities from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds (Creswell, 2007). Overall, the aim of the investigation remained central to each interview and data analysis processes. The primary aim was to highlight the educational experiences of African American male students labeled with learning disabilities and unearth the complexity of racial, cultural, and disability status within educational settings. Therefore, students' interviews and substantiating documentation were the primary sources used to develop converging lines of inquiry throughout the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2008).

Findings

The African American males labeled with learning disabilities in this study were college students who provided interpretative recollections of their K-12 educational experiences. The collective narratives of multiple African American students labeled with learning disabilities are significant due the similarity of experiences despite the wide array of school districts represented in the study. In the first theme, the collective narrative of the students details the problematic consequences of segregated self-contained classrooms while also confirming the ways in which instructional delivery provided by skilled teachers may assist in diminishing the consequences of the disability label. The second theme examines the how students navigate the academic terrain of high school while also being confronted with the burden of interdependent narratives related to race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The final theme highlights the ways in which dominant narratives, which problematically mischaracterize African American males as students with behavioral difficulties, distract from students' attempts to exercise self-determination and establish self-sustaining postures toward education.

The dilemma of access to the general education curriculum

Participants in this study were asked to discuss the educational quandary of where instruction should take place for individuals labeled with learning disabilities: in the general education classroom or separate, self-contained classrooms. Indeed, participants demonstrated divergent views on the benefits and advantages of being assigned to a segregated, self-contained classroom for students labeled with disabilities. For example, while some participants perceived special education services, which included instructional modifications and accommodations in the self-contained classroom, as a necessary benefit to assist them in accessing the general education curriculum others identified special education placement, disability labels, and special education services as stigmatizing.

Such ambiguity seemed to extend into participants' willingness and comfort level with accessing instructional accommodations and special education services within and outside of the special classroom. Participants who did not receive differentiated instruction—which included instructional modifications and accommodations—in the general education setting remained frustrated and coveted the experience of those students who received special education services in separate settings. For example, Michael explained feeling frustrated within the general education classroom where teachers were less prepared to address diverse learning styles. His statements reveal his recognition that the general education system was not providing an appropriate education to meet his learning needs. It should also be noted that Michael was diagnosed with a learning disability during his junior year of high school and did not want to be placed in special education classes because he feared that it would ruin his reputation as a star football player. The inability of the teacher to match his instructional needs is evidenced in the following statement:

> I wish I would have been in special education classes in high school [in order] to get the help I needed. I really needed it. I struggled [in the general education classes]. I also think when you have a learning disability, it wears on you. You start looking around and you are more cautious of who may know or who can tell [that you have a disability]. It was a struggle for me to get over the frustration of having a learning disability and not being able to pick up on assignments like everybody else.

Jonathan, on the other hand, a participant who attended a private high school which was designed to provide individualized instruction to students with mild and moderate learning disabilities, characterized his educational experiences as being enjoyable. He explained that the teachers' focus on the implementation of individualized instruction assisted him in the acceptance of various modification and accommodations and enhanced his identity as a students labeled with a disability. He explained his experiences with extended time on testing (an accommodation provided to students labeled with a disability who may require additional time to cognitively process exam questions and develop appropriate answers) "[the separate school setting] helped out. [Teachers] showed us a little more attention than the regular students. If I needed any type of help, they [teachers] were there for us. If we had to take a test then we could go down to the [testing] center instead of taking the test with regular students." Jonathan also explained that his special education teacher was "pretty much a second mother" who cared about his education.

The experiences of these participants demonstrate that it is not the location of instruction that matters, nor is it the label that is placed on the individual students that impacts their positive engagement and learning outcomes; instead, student success was based upon the quality of instruction and the ability of instructors to implement diverse instructional strategies that enhance the academic growth of all students. Carter explained that special education teachers would make the content in the general education classroom accessible, however, "when [he] would go to [general education] classes, it was way more of a challenge because those teachers didn't necessarily have the skills to teach someone who had disabilities." Gregory, a student labeled with dysgraphia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, similarly demonstrated an acute attentiveness to the ways in which the instructional practices employed by general education teachers constructed obstacles to educational opportunities. He made the following observation regarding general education teachers, "I have to understand that some teachers are better equipped to deal with disabilities than others, some are more informed." He continued by describing ineffective ways that teachers attempted to engage him by drawing negative attention to him if he appeared to be off-task. Gregory acknowledged that these interactions with teachers often caused teachers to misinterpret his action and erroneously characterize him as a being behaviorally defiant student. He explained:

> [Teachers] tried to force me to pay attention as opposed to just communicating with me. When I would get spotlighted [by the teacher] I would get defensive because I didn't like being spotlighted, I didn't like being made fun of by the teachers. I don't like being patronized, so I would get defensive and then I would argue and talk back and kind of verbally joust with the instructor.

As seen in Michael's earlier statement, the participants often viewed their disability label as a consequence of the instructional abilities of the teachers in the both the special education and general education settings. All participants acknowledged that their learning styles were uniquely divergent from

their abled-bodied peers who had not been labeled with disabilities, yet they unanimously opposed the label of learning disabled and continuously grappled with whether or not their disability—or learning difference—was a consequence of innate limitations within their academic abilities or a result of inappropriate instruction provided by classroom teachers. Their dependency on special education teachers and services caused participants to grapple with the interpretive meanings of the disability label. They questioned whether the disability label translated into meaning that they were "dumb" or whether the label meant that they demonstrated learning "differences." Jackson explained:

> Even though my mother told me that having a disability wasn't a bad thing, and wasn't the end of the world, and didn't mean I was dumb, I still felt a little self-conscious about it. If someone would ask why I received extra time on an assignment, I couldn't explain why.

Further demonstrating participants' ambiguity toward the importance of disability label and their uncertainty about the importance of instructional accommodations, Jackson, also made the following comment, "I'm okay with knowing that something is wrong with me, but without [the instructional modifications] I wouldn't have been able to make it through high school." It is interesting to note that this participant internalized dominant narratives about disability labels as a disparaging social marker.

Many participants seemed to be aware of the ways in which disability labels are socially constructed in the educational setting and how consequences of these labels vary according to educational context. They shared multiple instances in which teachers hurriedly covered instructional materials or provided limited instructional scaffolding. Participants believed instructional inconsistency contributed to the construction of a contrived obstacle to accessing the general education curriculum, which then reinforced the notion that students who could not learn through the primary method of instruction were disabled. For example, Jonathan also was intensely aware that disabilities are often a result of teachers' limited pedagogical knowledge and inability to implement instructional approaches that could extend to a more diverse student body. He also seemed to be aware of the need to reject the educational practice of labeling students as learning disabled and explained, that "it would be okay if no one ever mentioned the word disability." It is interesting that participants acknowledged the uniqueness of their learning styles while rejecting the label of learning disabled and simultaneously recognized teachers' instructional proficiency as a gateway to accessing the general education curriculum. Overall, Jackson's statement encompassed the sentiments of all the participants when he stated, "there wouldn't be learning disabilities if teachers ha[d] many different ways of teaching."

Student frustration as an unnecessary burden

Racial identity seems to assume an added burden for African American students who experience a barrage of racism and oppression as an inevitable experience in the educational setting (Kozol, 2005). As a consequence of this added oppression, participants frequently identified their educational experiences as "mostly a struggle and challenge because [they] had to prove to the teachers that [they] knew the material" (Albert). Like Albert, Carter affirmed, "I don't have the best memories of high school. I had to prove that I knew just as much as the rest of the other students in the classroom." Although the participants remained intrinsically motivated, six of the seven participants concurred with Michael who stated that he would get "really frustrated and agitated by that [their treatment] and [he] would act out and get in trouble" due to the perceived hostility experienced in the classroom settings. This collective experience of racial oppression experienced in the educational settings seemed to undermine participants' constructive educational experiences while also requiring participants to develop coping strategies to maintain affirming academic identities.

Students' shrewd attentiveness to the intersectionality of their race/ethnicity, gender, and disability seemed to intensify their frustrations within their schooling contexts. Albert is an example of a participant who characterized his educational experiences as one wrought by marginalization and oppression due to the intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status. Moreover, Albert was a student in foster care that transferred from a predominantly Black high to a predominately White high school when he

was assigned to new foster parents. He believed his racial identity and social class status significantly contributed to teachers' lowered academic expectations and subsequently required him to be evaluated for special education services. Albert's statement that "they [school personnel] won't stop judging me, no matter what" is confirmation of the added burden of schooling for many participants in this study. Albert explained:

> I was labeled as a troubled child from what they read [in my file] when I [transferred to] [name of predominately White school district]. They looked at me and read what was on the paper and then they judged me off that and put me in special education for the first time. So yeah, I think you always have to prove yourself to people regardless of if you want to or not.

These examples of teachers' responses to race and disability demonstrate how confounding identities uniquely intersect to contribute to cyclical experiences of labeling that resulted in pejorative stereotypes and lowered expectations, often preventing students from fully appreciating and engaging in the academic experiences in high school.

Many of the participants also explicitly spoke about the burdensome consequences of ableism in their interactions with non-disabled peers. Although students exhibited significant differences in their extracurricular activities—some participants were athletes, others were band members, and others were involved in student government—all identified moments when their personal strengths beyond the class eclipsed their academic performance. The discrepancy in students' non-academic performance skills and their academic performance was noticeable by their peers. The burden of the disability label and the resulting frustration seemed to spill over from their classroom experiences into their peer interactions. Edward, who as a high school football player commented on his discomfort with this discrepancy and he explained his peer reactions in this way:

> A lot of friends would crack jokes on me. [They would say], "How do you remember football plays, how do you know blocking assignments, how do remember certain things, but you struggle in class?" I never could answer, I didn't really understand that.

Participants frequently relied upon family members who encouraged them to remain academically engaged despite these seemingly burdensome and oppressive educational environments. Edward continued by explaining the important role his father played in maintaining his academic motivation:

> My dad always told me, if you want to learn something, you will learn it. No matter how hard it is, no matter how long it takes. If it means something to you, you will figure it out. And I guess that is what I did.

In frustration, Gregory also explained how educational experiences can be unjustifiably negative due to undesirable academic surroundings:

> It got harder at times. I used to wish I didn't have to deal with it … all of the negative labels and assumptions from students, from instructors. I had to deal with White male instructor issues. So I realized [to be more successful] I can adjust my actions, and that's what I did, I adjusted myself, and it got easier. I deal with that [stereotypes] a lot, but I'm ready to address those issues. Luckily, I didn't disengage.

It is not surprising that these African American male students labeled with learning disabilities in this study characterized their high school experiences as a frustrating and as an unnecessary burden within their educational experience. Like many other students of color, the participants spoke extensively about the need to invalidate derogatory academic characterizations in order to prove themselves as intellectually proficient or as students who were capable of competing with other students of color without disabilities and White peers in the general education classroom (Allen, 2013). As a consequence of these negative perceptions, participants repeatedly emphasized that they perceived their educational experiences as being burdensome because of the need to circumvent teacher subjectivity. The experiences of these participants further confirm the findings of Connor (2008) who asserted that "oppression on the basis of disability, race, and class moves between the macro- and micro-dimensions … yet it is arguably impossible to determine where oppression as a result of one marker of identity starts and oppression as a result of another stops" (p. 357).

Self-determination and the intersection of gender, race, and disability

An additional focus of this study was to identify the ways in which participants navigated the educational context and how they established self-affirming attitudes about their multiple marginalized identities. The following comments suggest that participants valued education and strived toward self-advocacy and independence. The participants also expressed that untoward characterizations of their racial and gender identities often undermined their ability to effectively self-advocate for appropriate education services and adequate support in the general education classroom. As an example, although self-determination is a concept celebrated in special education that encourages students to be grounded in the philosophy of autonomy and learn problem solving strategies that will assist in gathering supports toward personal life goals (Brewer, 2002; Trainor, 2005), participants in this study found that teachers and administrators often misunderstood their attempts at self-determination. School personnel mischaracterized their attempts toward self-advocacy as confirmation of dominant racial and gender narratives that portray African American males as adversarial and threatening. These attempts at self-determination further perpetuated the assumption that the students were behaviorally challenged and confirmed teachers' beliefs that students were in need of segregated, self-contained classrooms. For example, Gregory consistently identified the confounding ways in which gender, race, and disability labels impacted his interpersonal interactions with teachers and caused school personnel to "put [him] in two boxes—disabled and African American." Gregory astutely recognized the way in which multiple marginalized identities, including the confounding aspect of his height, were perceived as threatening and often diminished his attempts at self-determination:

> In my educational career [because I was] an African American male and had ADHD, [high school] teachers put me in two boxes—disabled and African American. Then with me being above six-feet tall, they expected me to be aggressive. [Teachers] have had to check themselves, but after I talk to them about my learning style, they would see me in a whole different light.

Gregory's insightful observations allowed him to connect teachers' pejorative attitudes toward race and disability with students' level of emotional and academic engagement within the educational context. As it was with Michael, whose father encouraged him to reach his goals regardless of pejorative dominant narratives, Gregory's mother, a social worker, assisted him in building a cadre of compensatory strategies that affirmed his racial and disability identities to ensure his academic success. As a result of his astute observations, he skillfully concluded that teachers' actions are frequently based on misinformed stereotypes that "contribute to a student who wants to not care, who wants to disengage." Gregory was keenly aware that "this is the reason a lot of students choose not to engage … they just don't want to deal with it [stereotypes]."

Participants observed that some teachers conveyed misperceptions about African American male students and students labeled with disabilities in the classroom. In some ways, students felt that teachers' depreciatory beliefs regarding race, gender, and disability were unmalleable. Yet, among the students there was frequent mention of key school personnel who served as intermediaries when teachers issued harsh consequences for minor infractions and perceived acts of self-advocacy as major disturbances to the classroom. Gregory explained, "The principal and English teacher were the ones who saw [what was going on]. Those teachers started to speak up for me." The awareness of race/ethnicity, gender, and dis/ability stereotypes in the educational context caused participants to recognize that the onus was on them to modify their behavior and remain academically self-determined. He purported that there "were a lot of stereotypes and labels at [his] school" and regardless of the interactions between himself and the teachers he believed that "these people [teachers] are never going to stop labeling me. They are never going to stop judging me, no matter what I do." Gregory, and the other participants, took it upon themselves to advocate for an appropriate education and inclusion within the general education classroom which is guaranteed under *Brown v. Board of Education* as well as IDEA. Conversely, it seems that limited attitudinal—as well as instructional—modifications were required by the teachers or other school personnel.

Implications for K-12 educators

The responses from the African American men in this investigation highlight the ways in which race, gender, and disability intersect to contribute to schooling contexts that often result in lowered academic expectation, segregation in self-contain classrooms, and "othering" by peers and teachers. Their experiences may confirm the hypothesis of Ferri and Connor (2005), who argued that "overtly racially segregating schooling practices have given way to largely under-acknowledged and more covert forms of racial segregation, including some special-education practices" (p. 454). The stories shared by these African American male students labeled with learning disabilities allow insight into the ways in which students navigate the unintended consequences of disproportionality. However, the findings in this study confirm the conclusions of the National Research Council (2002), that the complexity of factors contributing to the referral procedures for students makes it almost impossible to pinpoint the manner in which, or if, biases held by school personnel may inform actions that perpetuate the dilemma of over-representation of students of color receiving the label of disabled.

The educational experiences of the African American male participants in this investigation could be characterized as hostile or as school related microaggressions—"subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60). Sue et al. (2007) determined that "microaggressions are detrimental to persons of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities" (p. 273). The notion of microagressions has been extended to examine the daily forms of discrimination experienced by people with disabilities (Keller & Galgay, 2010). If this perception is true, then it may also be hypothesized that these untoward experiences have deleterious cultural and psychological consequences for students of color labeled with disabilities, which contribute to students' academic underachievement and overall academic disengagement. Take for example, Gregory's recognition that he was "lucky that [he] did not disengage." Gregory recognized that such a psychological reaction, by individuals with or without disabilities, is a reasonable survival strategy when presented with a hostile educational environment. These findings demonstrate that African American male students with learning disabilities perceive their educational experience as mostly hostile, which limits their opportunity to learn. Yet, these students remained committed to the "liberating potential of education" (Harper & Davis, 2012, p. 116). Educators must recognize that if African American male students labeled with learning disabilities experience schooling this way, educators must explore their personal actions that contribute to the marginalization of students based on race/ethnicity, gender, and disability status. By choosing not to acknowledge the presence of microaggressions in the schooling contexts, teachers and principals unintentionally nurture denigrating educational environments that prove to result in the disenfranchisement of African American students with learning disabilities.

Researchers have noted that African American students with learning disabilities, and other students of color with disabilities, experience more restrictive placements in special education, which isolates them from the rigorous curriculum found in the general education classroom (Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Therefore, the implicit bias surrounding racial and gender status for students with disabilities also requires close examination when considering students' educational placement into the general or self-contained classroom. The participants in this study attended a variety of high schools throughout the mid-Atlantic region making it difficult to identify specific factors that may have impacted special education placement and inclusion in the general education classroom. However, as the study illuminated, the intense focus in the extant literature on students' perceived academic inadequacies often elides more concentrated discussions about the quality of instruction provided by teachers in various educational environments. The participants' recommendation for increased number of teachers prepared to deliver high quality differentiated instruction aligns with the conclusions of Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera (2011), who argue for institutional safeguards for struggling students at the local and national levels that are informed by research and instituted by educators who deliver instruction grounded in cultural responsive pedagogies. These educators in the general education classroom also must have knowledge of special education policy and practices.

In creating a more inclusive classroom, teachers must embrace education as a democratic right for *all* students. This democratic approach requires that teachers acknowledge systems of exclusion in their own classrooms. This means educators must acknowledge that to exclude students of color and those with disabilities from accessing the general education curriculum due to pedagogical procedures that target only mainstream, middle-class students is parallel to exclusion from an establishment based on race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. This study reveals that teacher education programs must assist school personnel in the design of inclusive instruction that accounts for the learning style of culturally diverse learners. This requires teacher education programs to grapple with the inherent tensions of racism and ableism in order to foster in preservice teachers the dispositions to work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Teachers must embrace democratic views of teaching and learning wherein differentiated instruction and culturally relevant pedagogy are viewed as instructional methodologies that restore civil rights and dignity to students who have been traditionally marginalized in educational settings. As Jackson explained, "There wouldn't be learning disabilities if teachers ha[d] many different ways of teaching."

In concert with the application of culturally relevant pedagogies, students of color labeled with learning disabilities must be taught to adopt self-sustaining postures toward education (Ladson-Billings, 1995). African American students with disabilities, and others at-risk of being labeled with disabilities, require self-determination preparation that arms them with knowledge of their personal learning styles along with an understanding of historical oppression and provides them with the skills to be empowered to recognize and correct racism and ableism in their daily educational lives. The extant special education literature on self-determination attributes minimum attention to sociocultural factors, such as race/ethnicity and gender status, which unevenly influence educational experiences of students from racially diverse backgrounds. Most importantly, the education African American students with disabilities receive must allow them to improve conditions for themselves and their community (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As a consequence, allowing African American students with learning differences to become more equipped with self-advocacy strategies will allow them to effectively navigate the challenging educational terrain and develop agency to contribute to the educational narrative that impacts their future.

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