THE UNTOLD STORY: AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AT THE POSTSECONDARY LEVEL FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS AND STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

JOHNINE NOLA WILLIAMSON. The Untold Story: African American Men with Learning
Disabilities at the Postsecondary Level from the Perspectives of Parents and Students.
(Under the direction of DR. LISA R. MERRIWEATHER)

Fifty percent of African American men with learning disabilities will not persist past their first year of college (Newman et al., 2011). A bachelor's degree for an African American man means that he is five times less likely to be incarcerated than his peers with a high school diploma and will, on average, make approximately $32,000 per year more than his counterparts without a bachelor's degree (Trostel, 2015). Frequently neglected and inadequately represented in existing literature on learning disabilities are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities in higher education. The purpose of this phenomenological multi-case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted; six parent interviews and four student interviews. The study answered the following research questions (1) What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level? (2) What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level? (3) What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level? (4) What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution? (5) What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports? Based on the data analysis, three parent themes, and two students, four cross themes emerged respectively: (1) Bubble Wrap

Parenting (2) The Changing of the Guard, and (3) In the Intersection of Black and Disabled (1) Right in the Middle of the Dichotomy and (2) The Juggling Act. As well as cross-case themes (1) Higher Education Goals (2) Self-Disclosure the Key to Access (3) Seeking Normalcy and (4) Racism.

The findings underscore that when Black men with learning disabilities receive services that segregate them from their peers, they face a forced choice between preserving their identity and accessing necessary support. One recommendation arising from these findings is to make support services universally available. This entails granting all students access to supports such as assistive technology and note-taking apps that have traditionally been exclusively available for the disabled population. By taking this action, any stigma surrounding segregated support would be eliminated.

Keywords: African American Man, Learning Disability, Multi-Case Study, Parents, Postsecondary Education, Phenomenology

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This may be too much information but hey…anyone who reads this be encouraged, I finished this dissertation through a global pandemic, sudden death of a son to a lethal dose of fentanyl, an ongoing struggle with premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), and a divorce!!! All praise be to the almighty God!!! Be encouraged there is nothing in life you can't get through when God's strength meets your determination.

"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."~ Philippians 4:13

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my late great mother Barbara Jean Bennett-Kinsel who without her love, support, and ferocious dedication to my education, I would not be here. Because of her, I am the woman I am today, and I am forever grateful for her sacrifices.

I dedicate this to my grandmother and all my previous generations who put prayers in the heavenly's that are being fulfilled in my life.

To my late son Jeremiah Robertson (1998-2022) AKA: "Bubble," Jordan, Jace and I miss your smile, your laughter, and the way you brought joy to every room. You will always be in our memories and in our hearts. Love your bonus mom!!!

To my ancestors who built this country by the work of their hands and the sweat of their brow, I stand on your shoulders. I am the hope and the dream of the slave!!!

> " Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us," ~ Ephesians 3:20

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A bachelor's degree for an African American man means he is five times less likely to be incarcerated than his peers with a high school diploma and will make approximately $32,000 more per year on average than his counterparts without a bachelor's degree (Trostel, 2015). Earning a postsecondary degree has multiple advantages for Black men, including increased job satisfaction, physical health, and mental wellbeing. The children of Black men with bachelor's degrees are also more likely to pursue college and less likely to be incarcerated (Trostel, 2015). Obtaining a bachelor's degree for an African American man with learning disabilities (LD) can transform his future and the Black community.

Furthermore, as the American economy evolves, having postsecondary education becomes more of a necessity to compete in the job market. Following World War II, individuals possessing a high school diploma or less could secure middle-class incomes. Well-paying jobs were plentiful in blue-collar industries such as manufacturing and coal mining. However, the shift toward automation and globalization led to changes in the demand for more educated, highly skilled workers. With this shift, the bachelor's degree became the pathway to economic opportunity. Presently, fifty-six percent of professional and technical positions mandate a minimum of a four-year college education. Lacking this qualification, individuals find themselves marginalized from higher-paying career prospects. (Carnevale et al., 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The enrollment of students with disabilities has increased in nearly every state across secondary and postsecondary institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). There has been an increase in students with learning disabilities attending four-year colleges and universities and graduating (Sanford et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005). Unfortunately, this is not the reality for African American men with learning disabilities (Banks & Gibson, 2016). Fifty percent of African American men with learning disabilities will not persist beyond their first year of college (Newman et al., 2011). Overall, African American men are amongst the lowest percentage of any other group in higher education to complete postsecondary school (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Banks and Gibson (2016) found that the increase in enrollment of African American students with disabilities only yielded half the retention rate compared to their White, disabled peers.

If you belong to the White upper class and have a learning disability, there is an assumption that you are more likely to pursue higher education, a trend evident in the increasing enrollment of White upper-class learning disabled students in postsecondary institutions (Reid & Knight, 2006). Henderson (2001) reported that the largest growing segment of the learning-disabled population at the postsecondary institutions is White, and their parents make over $100,000 per year. This rise in White students with disabilities at the postsecondary level has perpetuated the narrow focus on White participants in disabilities research *(*Stapleton & James, 2020). There are multiple studies on students with disabilities at the postsecondary level, but they are saturated with White participants, and the minority voices are left out or represented on a small scale *(*Stapleton & James*,* 2020). With the voices of the White disabled students so prevalent in the research, researchers must examine and address the minority experience.

The transition to postsecondary education for African American students with learning disabilities involves navigating a new, more stressful, and demanding educational environment (Banks, 2014). African American men with learning disabilities face significant challenges navigating an environment where they do not see students, faculty, or staff with similar identities (Banks, 2014; Harper, 2012). African American men with LD are often reluctant to self-disclose their disability for fear of being labeled and perceived as incompetent (Banks, 2014). Additionally, this population is often unaware of the disability support services that are available. As a result, Black men with learning disabilities are not adequately supported at the postsecondary level and face multiple barriers to college success (Banks, 2014). Presumably, postsecondary institutions are responsible for providing an environment that allows all students to reach their maximum potential. However, African American men with learning disabilities are missing from the conversation. This population belongs to two marginalized groups, and postsecondary institutions overlook the needs of both identities. Regrettably, postsecondary institutions struggle with retaining African American men with learning disabilities, and it is time for university administrators to act.

Additionally, largely overlooked are the parents of African American learning-disabled men at the postsecondary level. African American men are prone to significant influence from their parents' beliefs regarding the importance of achieving education compared to others (Zhang et al., 2011). African American men are also likely to be strongly impacted by the behaviors and communications of their parents, particularly concerning academic achievement, accomplishments, and aspirations for future education (Kerpelman et al., 2008). African American parents of young men with learning disabilities frequently serve as one of the primary pillars of support for their sons in the postsecondary setting. However, existing literature largely disregards the pivotal roles of parents in their sons' journeys. The objective of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of both the sons and their parents, aiming to facilitate improved outcomes for the young men and provide guidance and recommendations for African American parents of learning-disabled sons so they can effectively support them in navigating the postsecondary environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological multi-case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. While extensive literature exists on the experiences of African American boys and their parents in the K-12 setting, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding experiences and perceptions at the postsecondary level.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following two sets of research questions:

Parent

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

2) What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

3) What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Student

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution?

2) What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?

Theoretical Framework

The voices of African American learning-disabled men attending postsecondary education are painfully absent from the literature (Banks, 2017). The intersection of race and disability is a research area seldom considered (Blanchett et al., 2009). Understanding how being a member of two marginalized communities shapes a person’s experiences is critical to how they navigate the world. Therefore, it is imperative to frame this study using a theory that acknowledges the complexity of living in two intersecting identities (Annamma et al., 2017).

Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) is a theoretical framework that creates a lens through which Critical Race Theory and Disabilities Studies are integrated (Annamma et al., 2017). Building on the work of Annamma et al. (2013) and multiple other scholars, DisCrit developed in response to students of color with disabilities who have not often been recognized in disabilities studies (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit enables scholars to unpack the complexity of the lived experiences of people of color with disabilities (Stapleton & James, 2020). When studying African American men with learning disabilities, it's essential to consider not just their disability status but also their race and gender. The lens of DisCrit enables the researcher to consider the multidimensional identity of African American learning-disabled men (Annamma et al., 2013).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework for exploring the multifaceted layers of the African American learning disabled man's journey through higher education. Within this framework, individuals with disabilities are viewed as parts of a broader network (Lindsay et al., 2016). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model outlines the intricate interplay between individuals and their surroundings, organizing this interaction into distinct systems including micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. This theoretical approach proves particularly beneficial for investigating disability-related issues, as it acknowledges the significance of both individual characteristics and environmental factors (Lindsay et al., 2016).

Overview of Methodology

This study examined the experiences and perceptions of African American men with learning disabilities, as well as the experiences and perceptions of parents of African American men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level. The researcher used a phenomenological multi-case study research design. Phenomenology describes the shared meaning of a lived experience by explaining what participants have in common (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected using a semi-structured interview method. Data analysis followed the general guidelines of phenomenological analysis, which included reviewing the transcriptions, examining each statement for significance, and clustering significant statements into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Significance of Study

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending postsecondary education. Additionally, it sought to understand the experiences of those who parent African American men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level. This research will inform practice, policy, support systems, and postsecondary institutions. First and foremost, this study is significant for African American men with learning disabilities because it provides information to assist these individuals in making informed postsecondary decisions. This study aims to inform African American learning-disabled men about the various psychosocial experiences Black men face while attending postsecondary institutions. Additionally, the study strives to enrich Black learning-disabled men’s understanding of the potential challenges that may contribute to their postsecondary experiences. Furthermore, the hope is that findings from the study will provide some insight for this population to assist in navigating their postsecondary education successfully.

Secondly, the study is significant for support persons such as parents, guardians, and higher education service providers. This study will inform them on how to support this population to thrive in a postsecondary education setting. Additionally, the insights from the research can assist the support persons in aiding Black men with learning disabilities to make informed postsecondary decisions. Finally, it will also help higher education support systems tailor their academic and student services to meet the unique needs of this population and reimagine how to include their parents in supporting their journey.

Lastly, the issues and concerns that African American men face at the postsecondary level warrant scholarly investigation, advocacy, and intervention. This study will examine the daily reality of this population's experiences. The research goal is to inform disability services and offices of academic diversity and inclusion so they can effectively support the needs of this population. This information is a gateway for higher education administrators to examine their current programs, policies, and procedures. Additionally, this is one of the few studies focused on this population, so it will provide foundational literature for other researchers to build upon.

Delimitations

The participants in this study were restricted to the following two groups:

Participants must attend a college or university in the United States of America, identify as an African American man, and have been diagnosed with any of the following learning disabilities listed below. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and enrolled or previously enrolled students at a four-year or two-year college or university. Diagnosis of the following condition(s) listed must have been diagnosed during the participant's time in K-12 education. However, for the study's purposes, participants self-disclosed their diagnosis without the need for supporting documentation.

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Attention deficit disorder (ADD)
- Auditory processing
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyslexia
- Specific learning disorder
- Visual processing
- Other

Any individual serving as a parent, whether through biological, adoptive, foster, step, or guardian roles, to an African American man. The young man must have presently been enrolled in or previously attended a four-year or two-year college or university in the United States of America. This young man must self-identify as African American and have a formal diagnosis for any of the following learning disabilities. Diagnosis of the following condition(s) listed must have occurred during their son's time in K-12 education. However, for the study's purposes, participants self-disclosed their son's diagnosis without the need for supporting documentation.

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Attention deficit disorder (ADD)
- Auditory processing
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia

- Dyslexia
- Specific learning disorder
- Visual processing
- Other

When the term learning disability was used in this study, it was an umbrella term referring to what Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) define as a specific learning disability as well as associated disorders that affect learning. All participants in the study have been diagnosed with what the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) calls "specific learning disabilities" and/or an attention, language, behavior, or processing disorder. The study intentionally includes any attention, language, behavior, or processing disorder that could affect learning.

This study specifically aimed to investigate African American men and parents of African American men with learning disabilities in postsecondary institutions. The focus was driven by a notable gap in existing literature, which overlooks the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level. The objective was to amplify their perspectives and experiences and highlight the crucial role of parents who provide support, encouragement, and guidance throughout their journey to completing postsecondary education.

Assumptions

Numerous assumptions frame this study. The first assumption is that race and disability affect the experiences of the participants. The second assumption is that participants would share their experiences openly and honestly. Finally, the third assumption is that the participants could recall and communicate events surrounding their experiences before and during postsecondary education.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are a framework so the reader will clearly understand the terminology framing this study.

1) Ableism: Discrimination in favor of able-bodied people.
2) African American or Black: Terms used interchangeably to refer to a person who can trace total or partial ancestry to Africa.
3) Learning Disability (LD): Any specific learning disability, including processing disorders and associated disorders that affect learning.
4) Parent: Any individual who gives birth to or nurtures a child, whether through biological, adoptive, foster, step, or other guardian role.
5) Predominantly White Institution (PWI): refers to an educational institution, such as a college or university, where most students, faculty, and staff are White. These institutions often have a disproportionately low percentage of racial and ethnic minorities compared to the total population.
6) Historically Black College or University (HBCU): is an institution of higher education in the United States that was established primarily to serve African American students.

Summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive outline of the research study, including the research questions, an overview of the methodology, limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and definitions of terms. The subsequent chapters are structured as follows:

Chapter 2: A literature review is foundational to understanding the context that this study is situated in. The chapter will cover in depth the theoretical framework, legal, and historical context of disability. Moreover, it will explore African American men and their parents regarding disability, identity, and higher education.

Chapter 3: Expands on the methodological framework for the study. The chapter reveals the various choices for research design, participant selection and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter additionally discusses the researcher's role and positionality. As well as the precautions that were taken to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality.

Chapter 4: Discusses the major findings of the study using direct quotes from the participants to highlight and provide clarity to the emergent themes.

Chapter 5: Concludes the discussion of the research study with an in depth examination of the findings as it connects to the existing literature and considers implications for practice and policy.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this phenomenological multi case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. This chapter discusses the literature on race, gender, disability, education, and the various intersections of the topic. The objective of this literature review is to provide the reader with a foundational understanding of the range of factors that affect the experiences and perceptions of African American men with a learning disability attending postsecondary education as well as from the perspective of their parents. Using the lens of Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), known as DisCrit and Ecological Systems Theory, as a framework for including a multi perspective view of the experiences of Black men with a learning disability in a higher education setting. The study seeks to answer the following research questions.

Parent

1)What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

2) What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

3) What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Student

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution?

2) What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?

Interrupting Whiteness in Disability Studies

White researchers often focus on White students with disabilities, resulting in a significant lack of representation of people of color in the study samples (Stapleton & James, 2020). Due to this issue, disability studies have been saturated with the term coined "Whiteness" (Smith, 2004). A crucial problem in disability studies at the postsecondary level is this continual focus on Whitness and the exclusion of people of color (Stapleton & James, 2020).

While some scholars have attempted to understand the daily life of persons with disabilities, the literature is saturated with the voices of White men and women. There is a desperate need in the literature for a strategic approach that tackles the multi-dimensional needs of African American students with learning disabilities that are characterized by issues of power, race, and gender. It is far time that the gap in the literature related to the lived experiences and complexities of African American students with disabilities be filled (Blanchett et al., 2009; Pena et al., 2016).

Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

Racism and ableism are inherent in American history (Baynton, 2001). However, few theories acknowledge the people that live at the intersection of the two identities (Annamma et al., 2013). Due to the complexity of living in two doubly marginalized identities, it is imperative to have a theory that acknowledges the difficulty (Annamma et al., 2018). The approach I plan to use as a framework for this literature review is Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit). DisCrit builds on the work of Annamma, Connor, Ferri, and multiple other scholars (Annamma et al., 2017). Annamma et al. (2016) combined Disability Studies and Critical Race theory to produce a new theoretical framework entitled Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) (Annamma et al., 2017). The creation of DisCrit was in response to students of color with disabilities who have been overlooked in the literature (Annamma et al., 2017). DisCrit theorizes about how race, racism, ableism, and disability are interwoven into the policies, practices and procedures of educational institutions that negatively affect students of color in comparison to their White counterparts with the same disability diagnosis (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit creates a unique lens that provides a home for intersecting marginalized identities that incorporate race, gender, and ability (Stapleton & James, 2020).

The term disability often carries a social stigma and puts a spotlight on a person's deficits and inability to fit into society's cultural normative tasks such as learning or walking (Stapleton & James, 2020). Disability and ability are often seen as definitive categories, either you are one or the other and society forces a person to choose which category they fit (Annamma et al., 2013). The language that society chooses as it relates to disability reflects how society includes or rejects persons with disabilities (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013). The DisCrit framework chooses to use the term dis/ability, to take the emphasis off what a person cannot do and place the focus on what they can do. Additionally, it disturbs the belief of the fixed nature of the dis/ability and strives to understand the person's situation (Annamma et al., 2017). DisCrit goes deeper than simply studying the discriminated and the discriminator; it recognizes people's multi-dimensional identity (Guillaume, 2011). The standards in American society are Whitness and ableism, DisCrit actively rejects the notion that Whiteness and ability are the standards to strive towards (Stapleton & James, 2020).

Tenants of DisCrit

To illuminate and illustrate the multi-dimensional nature of race and disability, the DisCrit framework provides a lens to review and interpret the literature and experiences of

African American men with learning disabilities. DisCrit encapsulates the multifaceted issues surrounding ability and race through seven distinct tenants (Annamma et al., 2013). These tenants outline fundamental truths around racism and ableism that have shaped our societal views and norms.

Tenant one of “DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy." (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19). DisCrit discards the notion that Whiteness and ableism are the gold societal standard (Stapleton & James, 2020). Tenant, one illuminates how race and dis/ability together are used to marginalize (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit emphasizes how racism and ableism are presented as a normal part of society (Annamma et al., 2013). For example, the disproportional representation of students of color in American special education is seen as a normal function of American Black children having inferior intelligence (Annamma et al., 2013; Banks, 2017; Blanchett et al., 2009). The concept of disability has been used as a weapon to justify discrimination against Blacks throughout time (Baynton, 2001). Many of the same arguments that place African Americans disproportionately in special education are the same ones that justified slavery; that somehow, being Black qualifies a person as mentally incompetent (Baynton, 2001; Liasidou, 2014).

Tenant two of “DisCrit values multi-dimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on " (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19). DisCrit revolves around the idea of multi-dimensional identities (Annamma et al., 2013). Tenant two recognizes that it is unachievable to separate a person into each of their individual identities. That all a person’s identities work in tandem to create their unique self (Annamma et al., 2013).

The idea around multi-dimensionality was explored in 1989 by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw who introduced the concept of intersectionality to acknowledge the compounding effects of race, gender, sexuality, etc. in the legal system. Crenshaw (1989) uses the term intersectionality to frame the marginalized overlapping experiences of racism and sexism that Black Women encountered. Crenshaw (1991) wrote, "The intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (p. 1244). Simply looking at people through the lens of one identity is an outdated idea; DisCrit embraces and celebrates the diversity of races, genders, and disabilities (Liasidou, 2014). DisCrit recognizes that how a person experiences stigma and segregation due their identities differ, and the navigation of the multi-dimensional marginalization of the identities is complicated (Annamma et al., 2013).

Tenant three of "DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19). DisCrit rejects the notion of race and disability being biologically assigned. In essence, no one is born disabled or Black; it is not until society assigns the label does a person become that identifiable marker (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). It embraces the idea that the two constructs are socially manufactured, and in that construction, society has attached a stigma (Annamma et al., 2013). While these categories are all a product of social construction, these categories have great implications for people's lives (Annamma et al., 2013). Tangible psychological effects exist when labeled according to your race or disability, thus setting a person on the perimeter of the acceptable western cultural norm (Liasidou, 2014).

Tenant four of "DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19). DisCrit highlights the unrepresented voices of marginalized populations (Liasidou, 2014). DisCrit takes a deeper look into understanding how historically marginalized groups have responded to injustices by creating coping mechanisms such as counter-narratives (Annamma et al., 2013). For instance, Banks (2015) and Harper (2006) embrace this tenant by highlighting the "voices" of traditionally marginalized populations in their research. Banks (2017) discusses the counter-narrative that African Americans with disabilities construct out of necessity in order to survive in the dominant culture. DisCrit allows marginalized voices to step into the spotlight and reverse the norm of Whiteness in disabilities studies (Stapleton & James, 2020).

Tenant five of "DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19). DisCrit considers the historical and legal facets of race and disability and how they have been used collectively and individually throughout history to deny civil rights and access to groups of people (Annamma et al., 2013). For example, disability was a major factor in the four American citizenship debates of the 19th and early 20th centuries: women's suffrage, African American freedom, civil rights, and immigration restrictions. As the citizenship categories were challenged, disability was used to justify who was included and excluded from citizenship (Baynton, 2001). Tenant five of DisCrit highlights these historical events and their connection to race and disability (Annamma et al., 2013).

Tenant six of "DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with disabilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19). DisCrit acknowledges the privilege and the associated benefits of Whiteness and ableism (Annamma et al., 2013). When disabled people have been afforded privilege, it was given to White, male, middle-class disabled people (Annamma et al., 2013). While being a created identity, Whiteness has real consequences for the distribution of privilege, resources, and opportunity. Identifying with Whiteness is consistent with the identity that provides people with greater access, rights, and power (Molina, 2014). In essence, Whiteness has an actual weight, no specific definition, external to the description given by Western culture or, more explicitly, the American way of life. (Smith, 2004). Furthermore, Whiteness is a norm that carries oppressive power and privilege. The very existence of Whiteness is dependent on the definition of Blackness; the two coexist in a standard that creates dominance and subordination (Smith, 2004). Furthermore, Whiteness is a normative and ruling power that is the foundational rationale for Eurocentric culture and thought. It serves as a standard to classify those as non-White as not able. (Smith, 2004).

Lastly, tenant seven of "DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19). DisCrit supports activism and resistance of all kinds (Annamma et al., 2013). It embraces the belief that people do not only need to learn about the systems that oppress marginalized populations, but they must challenge and change them through advocacy and action (Liasidou, 2014).

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory has been used extensively in research concerning individuals with disabilities and their families. The ecological framework serves as a tool for structuring information about the relationship between people and their surroundings, enabling an understanding of their interrelationships (Algood & Hong, 2013). Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human development within the context of multiple interconnected systems. This theory suggests that individuals are influenced not only by immediate environments but also by broader social, cultural, economic, and political contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Four systems make up the ecological model (see Figure 1): microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. These four systems are described below.

1. Microsystem: Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the micro-system as the immediate environments in which an individual directly interacts, such as for structuring information about the relationship between people and their surroundings, enabling an understanding of their interrelationships Bronfenbrenner (1979) claimed that the microsystem was the most effective mode to analyze human behavior and development in terms of system. It was to understand what motivates the behavior and development of a particular individual. This was best observed when the individual was observed within a dyad. Dyads include the interaction between two people. Instead of information being collected from one person in isolation, more is learned by studying both parties concurrently because the process of one person affects the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For African American young men and their parents, the microsystems level can include their nuclear family, extended family, friends, community networks. These microlevel networks often play a significant role in their daily decision making (Banks, 2014).
2. Mesosystem: A mesosystem encompasses the interactions among two or more settings where the individual is actively involved, such as the relationships between home, school, and neighborhood peer group for a child, or between family, work, and social life for an adult (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A mesosystem is the interaction between two or more microsystems. A mesosystem is a system of microsystems. The

mesosystem is characterized by the network of interactions involving two or more environments where the developing person actively engages (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For African American young men and their parents, the microsystems level can include relationships between family, school, house of worship, and community organizations.

3. Exosystem: The exosystem encompasses the external environments where the individual is not directly involved, however events occur that the individual is directly affected (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For African American young men and their parents this can include things such as socioeconomic status, employment opportunities, discriminatory lending and housing practices, systematic racism, access to educational inequalities, and various other structural barriers that are out of the control of the individual.
4. Macrosystem: The macrosystem refers to the social and cultural context in which the individual is embedded. It encompasses the larger cultural, societal, and historical contexts that shape the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Cultural values shape what and how people do things; for African American young men and their parents this can include cultural beliefs, values, and norms related to parenting and education, as well as things such as social justice movements and historical movements.

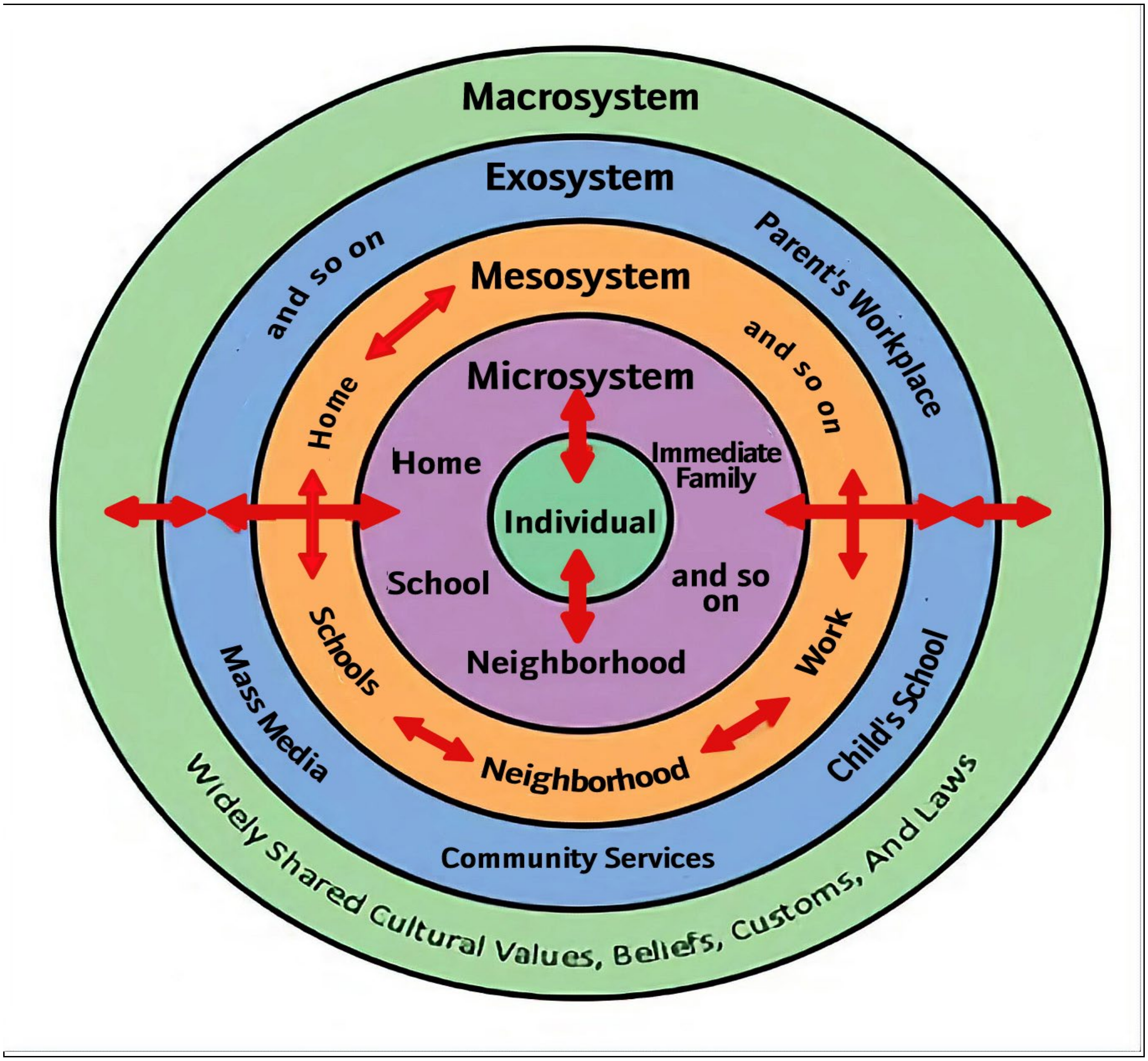

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Model

Learning Disability and Education

Living with a learning disability can be a perpetual struggle due to the constant experience of failure and focus on poor academic performance. Countless students with learning disabilities develop poor self-worth and low self-esteem (Mercer et al., 2011). One-third of learning-disabled students have been maintained in a grade at least once. (Cortiella et al., 2014). Repeated school failures discourage many students with learning disabilities. When these students are faced with an academic situation that is beyond their control, it is difficult to maintain their motivation for academic success (Cortiella et al., 2014).

The area of academic struggle is not the only place that students with learning disabilities battle. Multiple students have social skill deficits, like greeting new people and receiving criticism or praise. The social insufficiency is usually a result of the misunderstanding of social cues. This misunderstanding can cause challenges when interacting with others (Mercer et al., 2011). Additional issues with social and emotional problems like increased levels of depression are seen in students with learning disabilities as well (Mercer et al., 2011).

Definition of Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are thought to occur from a difference in the way the brain works that disturbs a person's capacity to connect, process, recover, store, or convey information (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Additionally, it can affect a person's ability to coordinate movement, the direction of attention, utilization of oral or written language, and mathematical computations. These skills are critical for effective navigation in school, work, and life (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). Learning disabilities are not thought to have a direct correlation with a person's intelligence. People tend to associate learning disabilities with low IQ; however, learning disabilities are generally associated with average or above-average intelligence. Additionally, learning disabilities may concur with mental or physical disabilities (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). According to Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) learning disabilities result from a difference in a person's brain structure that the person is born with and is often hereditary. The nature of these disorders is not well understood; however, significant progress has been made over the years to pinpoint some of the learning disabilities to a particular portion of the brain (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Although the root cause of a learning disability is frequently unknown, what is evident is that learning challenges persist well into adulthood for affected individuals (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011).

The term learning disabilities encompasses a broad spectrum of issues, making it challenging to describe a typical profile of a learning-disabled individual (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997). Many students with learning disabilities share similar characteristics, but this population is by no means identical. Students can show different strengths or weaknesses that vary from person to person (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). Due to the heterogeneous nature of this population, there has been an evident struggle in the United States to have one universal definition of learning disability.

The term "learning disability" was born in 1963 by Samuel Kirk, a professor of special education. He used the term at a conference with a group of parents concerning their children. The parents responded positively to this term, and it substituted more stigmatizing terminology such as "perpetual handicap" and "brain-injured" (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). The term "learning disability" caught on quickly in the 1960s and 1970s because it spoke to a crucial concern for parents of special needs children and the professionals that taught and treated them (Lyon et al., 2001). It is ironic that the label "learning disabled" stuck and is the most frequently used term in special education because Samuel Kirk constantly voiced his animosity for labels (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). However, from the beginning of the term "learning disabilities," a consensus on the definition of the term has been a debatable issue (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011).

The definition of a specific learning disability in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has not changed since 1975. IDEA defines a specific learning disability as:

> The term specific learning disability means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken, or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such terms include such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

In contrast, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), uses the term “specific learning disorder.” The definition the APA sets forth includes how the disorder is diagnosed. The APA defines a specific learning disorder as:

> The diagnosis requires persistent difficulties in reading, writing, arithmetic, or mathematical reasoning skills during formal years of schooling. Symptoms may include inaccurate or slow and effortful reading, poor written expression that lacks clarity, difficulties remembering number facts, or inaccurate mathematical reasoning. Current academic skills must be well below the average range of scores in culturally and linguistically appropriate tests of reading, writing, or mathematics. The individual’s difficulties must not be better explained by developmental, neurological, sensory (vision or hearing), or motor disorders and must significantly interfere with academic

> achievement, occupational performance, or activities of daily living. Specific learning disorder is diagnosed through a clinical review of the individual’s developmental, medical, educational, and family history, reports of test scores and teacher observations, and response to academic interventions. (APA, 2017).

The most common forms of specific learning disabilities (LD) impact a person in the areas of reading, math, and writing. They may coincide with other disorders of attention, language, and behavior such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Auditory Processing Disorders, and Visual Processing Disorders (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Although these disorders are not identified as a particular type or subtype of learning disability, these disorders are commonly associated with learning difficulties. These associated disorders reduce a person’s capacity to receive, process, associate, recall or express information. (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Medical vs. Social Construction of Disability

Disability has been viewed from two different perspectives, the medical and the social perspective (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013). Traditional frameworks of disability studies are steeped in the medical philosophy of disability (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). This model of disability is rooted heavily in the clinical diagnosis of the condition and views a disability as a challenge to overcome and the onus is on the person to overcome that challenge (Mitchell, 2013). The medical model of disability is categorized by the dichotomy of wellness and illness whereas illness can be either treated or cured (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). It implies that the person with the disability has some sort of insufficiency that needs to be fixed or cured so that they can be "normal" (Brown & Broido, 2015).

Using the rationale of the medical model historically, individuals with disabilities were denied equal rights. The concept of disability has been weaponized to discriminate against disabled individuals (Baynton, 2001). Furthermore, this model has been used to discriminate against Blacks in education. This model has been used to shape who goes into special education by focusing on a physical, intellectual, or psychological impairment that deviates from the cultural norm (Baynton, 2001; Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). The medical model of disability imposes a narrow view of biological inferiority and does not consider the social and cultural structures for disability (Mitchell, 2013). It does not account for cultural and social norms of African Americans and has been a catalyst for overrepresentation of Black children in special education (Blanchett, 2005, Mitchell, 2013).

The social construction of disability asserts that the medical model of disability is flawed and incorrect in its assumptions on how it views persons with disabilities. The social model of disability is focused on altering the social constructions that put boundaries on individuals with disabilities (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). More recent views of disability have been shifting their thought to social construction of disability (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013). This model of disability situates disability not as a person-centered issue, but it places disability in the context of social and cultural norms (Mitchell, 2013). There are some disabilities that are considered "normal" or commonplace in society such as poor eyesight or hearing loss. What qualifies a person to have good vision or hearing is based on the environment that they are in. Such as the presence of light, color, or sound can influence one's ability to hear or see. This concept of how disabled you are is purely a social construct based on the dominant culture's standards (Annamma et al., 2013).

The definition of disability and race is contingent upon the social and cultural perspective of the time; therefore, making the construct of race and disability simultaneously fundamental and socially constructed (Annamma et al., 2017). It is undeniable that people have differences, and those differences affect how they move throughout the world. However, the differences are never static and how accepting the culture is to them changes regularly. So, the argument is that disability is indeed a social construct about what your perceived ability is and how acceptable it is compared to the standard of the dominant culture (Annamma et al., 2013). Although many laws and legislation have been enacted to protect persons with disabilities, it frequently is not enough to shield them from the way society has deemed and constructed what it means to be disabled.

Legal Context

Just as the history of any marginalized population, the history of disability has exhibited both good and often cruel treatment of people with disabilities (Baynton, 2001). Throughout the history of education, disabled students in the U.S. public school system have been denied the same access to an appropriate education (Baglier et al., 2011). This section will explore the history of disability in education and the laws surrounding them to help the reader understand the laws and legislation foundational for students receiving appropriate accommodations.

Educational attainment is imperative for all children, but it is of greater importance for children with disabilities whose ability to achieve economic and social standing may be limited in the United States (Aron & Loprest, 2012). For many years, students with disabilities' educational needs were ignored (Yell, 1998). Until 1958 there was no legislation for K-12 education that addressed the needs of the education of children with disabilities (Madaus, 2011). The first time the federal government created legislation in relation to the education of students with disabilities was the adding of training for teachers of children with "mental retardation" in the 1958 Act entitled Teaching in the Education of Mentally Retarded Children (Yell, 1998).

The civil rights movement of the 1950s was predominantly a movement to allow African Americans the opportunity for equality and greater protections. However, this legislation also provided greater protections for persons with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998). While the civil rights movement provided greater protections for persons with disabilities, the inception of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975 provoked a significant shift in educational access for students with disabilities, making it illegal not to provide a free and appropriate education for all (Yell, 1998).

The EHA mandated public schools to provide special education services for students with disabilities (Madaus, 2011). This act mandated individualized educational roadmaps based off educational assessments and the creation of personal educational goals (Madaus, 2011). This individualized plan is referred to as the Individualized Education Plan or (IEP) and is still utilized today in K-12 public education; to support students' goals and to help lay out a plan for transition from high school into a postsecondary setting of the students' choosing (Cawthorn & Cole, 2010).

The Passage of Section 504 of the rehabilitation Act of 1973 was a milestone for people with disabilities. This act made it illegal for recipients of federal funding to discriminate against people with disabilities. Public schools were covered under this legislation because they receive federal funding. The law entitled a free public education that was equal to their nondisabled peers (Aron & Loprest, 2012). This legislation helped to establish additional accountability in public schools for children with disabilities. (Madaus, 2011). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was created in 1990 and reauthorized in 1997; this law was enacted to increase protection for students with disabilities by providing a free and appropriate education through special education services with structural and procedural safeguards in the school system (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001).

Prior to IDEA, only one in five children with a known disability prior to 1975 attended public school. Multiple states barred children with specific types of disabilities from attendance (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001, p. 5). This left multiple children with disabilities zero access to the public school system (Aron & Loprest, 2012). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was a more robust piece of legislation that protected the rights of children with disabilities (Madaus, 2011). This legislation promises to provide “a free, appropriate, public education, in the least restrictive environment” (Aron & Loprest, 2012). While the history and legislation for children with disabilities in K-12 have come a long way and helped many children, there is a long way to go to support this population, particularly minoritized students. (Yell, 1998).

The legislation that regulates K-12 education is foundational for the matriculation of students into postsecondary education (Madaus, 2011). In the higher education setting there are other pieces of legislation that differ from the K-12 setting that have historically supported students with disabilities. The Higher Education Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act guarantees that a person with a disability will not be discriminated against in receiving services, accessing educational programing, or receiving funds; this legislation was the catalyst for increased students' enrollment in higher education (Henderson, 2001). Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 guarantees rights for people with disabilities in higher education (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). While disability law in education has remained stable over the years, students with disabilities in educational settings continue to struggle to receive an education that will set a foundation for long term success (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001). The introduction of the

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) created the promise of postsecondary access and achievement for individuals with disabilities, like their non-disabled peers. However, this promise has gone unfilled for African American men with learning disabilities.

African Americans and Disability

A disability label for an African American student can be both a source of motivation and frustration (Banks & Hughes, 2013). Labeling for the African American is often a way to be excluded and highlight that the person does not fit into the "normalcy" of the dominant culture and create an image of them being defective or deficient (Gallagher et al., 2014). Banks and Hughes (2013) assert that the disability label caused frustration for students as they began to discover that disability is a series of complex interactions that require a choice of ongoing silence, deliberate acts of resistance, or the creation of a story that rejects inferiority perpetuated by the dominant culture. Additionally, Banks & Hughes (2013) found that a label of disabled leads to reduced expectations and undesirable stereotypes, and students create counter-narratives to avoid adopting unfavorable stereotypes. Furthermore, Petersen (2009) found that African American students adopted a refusal to internalize the narrative of inferiority in ability or intelligence.

Black Boys and K-12 Education

Schools are often a source of trauma for Black boys, with or without disability labels. This trauma is disproportionately seen in urban school settings where a large majority of Black students are educated. However, the lion's share of educators is White and female (Proffitt, 2020). The same White female educators assign Black boys more frequent and harsh discipline for less severe offenses. As well, Black boys are suspended or expelled at three times the rate of their White peers. This type of discipline causes Black boys to miss important instruction and reduces the chances of fostering a healthy racial and self-identity (National Education Association, 2011; Wright & Ford, 2019).

Black boys are often the main target of racism in the United States educational system. Stereotypes of Black boys as uneducated, threatening, lazy, disinterested, and dangerous continue to permeate schools (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Wright& Ford, 2019). Due to this perception, teachers are less likely to recognize Black boys as gifted. This perception leads to Black boys being enrolled 2.5 times less in gifted and talented programs than their peers. However, their previous academic record indicates they would benefit and succeed in the program (National Education Association, 2011). This extends well into high school, where Black boys are under-referred and underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and college preparation programs as well (Harry & Klingner, 2014).

Educators, especially White ones, will tend to approach interactions with Black boys from a deficit and racist perspective (Wright& Ford, 2019). This perspective imposes an ongoing narrative that Black boys will fail. So, it is no surprise that less than half of Black boys graduate from high school on time, and many will go on to complete a general education degree (GED) (National Education Association, 2011). Even money and access seem not to exclude a segment of Black boys from low academic performance. Middle-class Black boys are considerably behind in grade point average and on standardized tests compared with their White peers (National Education Association, 2011).

Before a Black boy begins to establish his academic identity, he is labeled and often mislabeled in the American educational system (Banks, 2016). While there are some mislabeled African American boys, there is a segment of the population in special education that has been legitimately diagnosed as learning disabled and benefit from appropriate accommodations

(Cortiella et al., 2014). However, when a student presents with a legitimate disability, parents of color are more likely to come against structural barriers that ultimately lead to their child receiving culturally unresponsive and inadequate special education services (Blanchett et al., 2009). The labels and the mislabels assigned to African American boys early in life will follow them well into adulthood (Banks, 2017).

Overrepresentation in Special Education

Overrepresentation or disproportionality exists when a particular group is represented at a higher rate in special education than represented in the total school population (Blanchett, 2005). Researchers have recognized the unequal representation of African American males in K-12 special education (Banks, 2017; Getzel, 2008). The statistics of the disproportionate and unjust representation of African American men in special education are alarming. Current statistics indicate African American boys represent only 9% of those enrolled in public schools; however, they are three times as likely to be labeled intellectually disabled or emotionally disturbed and one-half times as likely to be labeled learning disabled compared to their White and Asian counterparts (NCES, 2020).

Since the introduction of special education in the 1970s, the placement of Black students in special education has been controversial. Special education was formed to deliver comprehensive services to students with disabilities who were historically barred from public education. However, the focus on providing equity for students with disabilities overlooked the system's inability to contend with race (Proffitt, 2020). Black students labeled with disabilities and placed in special education have an experience of the world that differs from their counterparts without disability labels. While all Black students are at risk of encountering racism, existing as a Black student with a disability can be notably difficult as the label produces stigma (Proffitt, 2020).

Black children are targets in the American public school system unjustly labeled as mentally inferior and placed in special education as an undercover tactic of upholding racism and propagating White supremacy (Blanchett, 2006). Before a young man begins to find his academic prowess, he is labeled and often mislabeled in the American educational system. The mistreatment and miseducation of Black men seem to haunt them well into adulthood (Peterson, 2009). The historical legacy of the belief that ability is somehow tied to race is embedded deeply in the systems of American public school (Baynton, 2001; Shifrer et al., 2011). It starts very early in classrooms where culturally unresponsive curriculum and pedagogy are employed, and the lack of connection for students of color is often interpreted as a personal deficit (Blanchett, 2006).

Skiba et al., (2006) conducted a study in the Indiana public school district; they found African Americans represent 8.4% of students in the general education setting and over 27% of those served in special education classrooms. They found that African Americans are three times more likely to be taught outside of the general classroom over 50% of the school day. On top of over-representation and the exclusion from the general classroom population, African American students with disabilities encounter an elevated rate of school discipline and higher rates of scholastic incompletion (Cortiella et al., 2014).

Alongside African American overrepresentation in special education, there is another uneven representation in the special education space. One of the central problems in special education is the disproportionate diagnosis of learning disabilities (Shifrer et al., 2011). There are many reasons that learning disabilities are overrepresented. Diagnosing a learning disability is one that comes with an initial referral of an issue that is occurring that is affecting how a student learns (Shifrer et al., 2011). This diagnosis comes with some subjective observations that place the student in a category that classifies them as "not normal" (Blanchett, 2006). This subjectivity coupled with racism often leads African American students more often to be placed in self-contained classrooms away from their non-disabled peers. (Blanchett, 2006; Connor et al., 2018).

African American Men, Learning Disability, and Higher Education

Academic Supports in Higher Education

Students with learning disabilities are one of the fastest-growing risk groups in higher education institutions (Hadley et al., 2019). Higher education institutions are required by law to provide reasonable academic accommodation and support to qualified students with disabilities who disclose their disabilities and request such assistance (Newman & Madus, 2014). Universities must provide accommodation if this does not radically change the academic program and does not pose undue financial or logistical difficulties. If the accommodation is determined to be insupportable, the university will only provide minimal accommodation (Cawthon and Cole, 2010).

When students transition from high school to college, it is their responsibility to request accommodations and advocate for themselves to receive appropriate accommodations for their disability (Cawthon and Cole, 2010). Students with learning disabilities must advocate for themselves in a greater capacity at the postsecondary level. Often this is the first educational experience they have had with minimal guidance (Banks, 2014). Furthermore, many students with learning disabilities are anxious about requesting help through accommodations due to the stigma and do not register or use disabilities services (Banks, 2014; Denhart, 2008). Conversely, when students with learning disabilities go to obtain accommodations, they are underprepared to find, secure, and advocate for services. (Cawthon and Cole, 2010).

It is essential for students with learning disabilities to have a clear understanding of their disability and educational needs to make a successful transition from secondary to the postsecondary environment (Cawthon and Cole, 2010). Students without appropriate information on their rights and responsibilities related to receiving reasonable accommodations limit their ability to advocate for themselves (Skinner, 2004). While it was essential for success, Cawthon and Cole (2010) found that students had very little knowledge about their disability and the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) created in their K-12 education to support their learning needs. Skinner (2004) also found that students with learning disabilities who had successfully graduated from college were knowledgeable about learning difficulties and developed strategies to minimize those difficulties.

Troiano (2010) conducted a study with 262 undergraduate students with learning disabilities. The study examined five years of attendance and graduation rates. The study found that in 68% of 262 undergraduate students with learning disabilities studied, regular attendance at the Learning Resource Center was a predictor of graduation. Moreover, students who attended the Center constantly had higher grade point averages than students who attended less frequently. Additionally, Troiano et al., (2010) found that students who had poor grades on average were present at less than 50% of their scheduled support appointments.

When learning disabled students use the appropriate accommodations at the postsecondary level, they are more likely to graduate (McGregor et al., 2016). There is a range of accommodations offered to students with disabilities. Accommodations are traditionally offered through the school's disabilities services department or the academic department that houses their major. The accommodations that can be provided include:

(a) part-time schedule or modified course allowance, (b) longer time to complete program, (c) ability to repeat classes without penalty, (d) waiver of language requirements, (e) late course withdrawal without penalty, (f) priority registration, (g) additional time to complete courses, and (h) course substitution (Mull et al., 2001).

While disabilities services or the academic department plays a pivotal role in coordinating accommodations, faculty members are instrumental in executing the necessary accommodations for learning disabled students. Cawthon and Cole (2010) found that the lion's share of encounters between faculty and students with learning disabilities was more formal interactions regarding official requests for accommodation letters rather than casual interactions and meetings. The low contact students with learning disabilities have with faculty is a potential issue for support services because faculty are some of the best resources for direct help and assistance. Denhart (2008) found that students felt misunderstood by faculty members and perceived that it was a barrier to their success.

African American Men and Higher Education

Although multiple supports exist at the postsecondary level, the sad but true reality is that 70% of Black men do not complete a college degree within six years, compared to 57% of all undergraduates (Harper, 2006). Although the statistics on Black men in the postsecondary environment look bleak, a segment of African American men do succeed and thrive on college and university campuses throughout the United States. Harper (2012) interviewed 219 Black men over 42 different campuses to discover the key to success for Black men in higher education. Harper (2012) labeled the men in his study "achievers." The reality of how Black men’s experiences are ignored in research was echoed in Harper’s (2012) study when nearly every man interviewed said it was the first time anyone ever asked them how they successfully navigated the postsecondary environment.

Harper (2012) found that being exposed to the collegiate environment before college attendance significantly shaped college aspirations. Additionally, the role of family and peers also played a role in postsecondary decision-making. A non-negotiable expectation from parents of college attendance was a strong catalyst to get them to start their postsecondary journey (Harper, 2012). After an African American man starts his postsecondary journey, many factors affect him along the way.

Finances play a significant role in the choice of school, the necessity for financial aid, and the obligation to secure and hold employment to maintain full-time enrollment status at the university level (Strayhorn, 2014; Harper, 2012). Strayhorn (2008) found that having a solid support person(s) and supportive relationships with faculty and peers was a critical factor in postsecondary satisfaction for Black men. Men in Harper's (2012) study thought that their grade point average was higher because they had solid time management skills. They created a community of academically minded peers and built relationships with faculty and held membership in clubs and organizations where they were able to have leadership roles. Additionally, they created networks with peers who shared success strategies and resources that provided support in difficult courses (Harper, 2012).

Academic and Social Experiences of African American Men at PWI's

Often African American men will choose to work on their aspirations of degree completion at a predominately White postsecondary institution; however, these institutions for African Americans can feel like a hostile and unwelcoming place (Harper, 2006). Allen (1992) found that on predominantly White campuses, Black students felt isolated and experienced a feeling of otherness through the many different forms of racial microaggressions from their White classmates and faculty members. Conversely, Allen (1992) uncovered that when students attended a historically Black college or university (HBCU), Black students stressed expressed feelings of belonging, which they felt supported and valued. In the overall comparison of Black students enrolled at an HBCU versus a predominately White college; the researchers found significantly higher grade point averages and more significant social involvement and integration into the academic community (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994). At PWIs, African American men commonly face microaggressions and feel ostracized in the campus community (Harper, 2009; Robertson and Chaney, 2017). The pressure to disprove stereotypes and continually prove that they were granted admittance to the university because of their intellectual capabilities and not their race is a well-known burden that African American men face (Harper, 2009; Harper, 2012). African American men enrolled at PWIs experience racism, overtly and covertly, daily, and it takes a toll on their psychological well-being (Bridges, 2010). African American men experience discrimination at predominantly White institutions, which causes them to have to perpetually publicize their academic accomplishments to their White peers (Harper, 2009). Strong self-efficacy, resilience, and a robust sense of Black identity were prevalent in men who successfully handled the racist situations where they lived and learned (Harper, 2009).

For African American men to persist at PWIs, they must have a stable support system of peers and faculty; this is associated with a high level of satisfaction for this population in colleges and universities. (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2017). The concept of grit was another attribute that proved to be associated with positive academic outcomes for Black men at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2013). Furthermore, Harper (2012) found that some of the men in the study who were at predominately White institutions were the only Black student in many of their classes. Further, the research found that being one of the few and often the only Black men their

White peers and professors had interacted with led to a destructive relationship with the campus culture (Harper, 2009).

Learning Disabilities and African Americans

Noticeably absent from the literature are the experiences of African Americans with learning disabilities (Banks, 2017). If African Americans are included in the literature, there is negligible representation (Annamma et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the written studies do provide some foundational insight into the learning-disabled population (Cawthon and Cole, 2010). The following studies discussed are studies that have a small representation of African Americans in their sample.

In comparing students with learning disabilities to their non-disabled peers in the postsecondary setting, McGregor et al., (2016) surveyed 63,802 students at 11 four-year universities in the United States. The participants in the survey that self-identified as learning disabled, African American, and male was a small percentage. The study found students with learning disabilities experienced increased difficulty with assignments, more significant contact with faculty outside of the classroom setting, increased nonacademic and academic barriers to success, and overall diminished satisfaction with their time at the university than their non-disabled peers. Moreover Denhart (2008) found that students with learning disabilities need to work harder than their non-learning disabled peers.

Social connectedness and academic assimilation were shown to be two essential factors that positively affect a student's growth as a scholar and increase the probability that students with learning disabilities will persist (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). Orr and Goodman (2010) interviewed 14 students with learning disabilities, and out of the 14 participants, one identified as an African American man. One of the most outstanding findings from the study was that 13 out of 14 participants articulated that they felt "stupid," "embarrassed, and/ or "ashamed." The participants of the study stated feeling "stupid" more than 40 times during the interviews. The learning disabled population shows a great deal of resiliency despite the multiple challenges. This resolve to persevere seems to result from relationships that provide support and encouragement (Orr & Goodman, 2010). The importance of feeling connected in the postsecondary environment was an essential facilitator of success for this population (Orr & Goodman, 2010). While the literature overwhelmingly focuses on White learning-disabled students, the few studies that focus on the African American learning disabled postsecondary man will be discussed next.

The literature on African American disabled men in the four-year postsecondary environment is scant, and few studies attempt to understand the experiences of this population (Banks, 2017). Allen (1992) found that on predominantly White campuses, Black students felt isolated and experienced a feeling of otherness through the many different forms of racial microaggressions from their White classmates and faculty members. Conversely, Allen (1992) uncovered that when students attended a historically Black college or university (HBCU), Black students expressed feelings of belonging, which they felt supported and valued. (Banks & Gibson, 2016). Additionally, what is apparent in the literature was found in Banks and Gibson's (2016) qualitative study. Four themes emerged from the study: increased prevalence of family influence, the need for encouraging faculty, a sense of belonging on campus, and the importance of culturally responsive disabilities support services (Banks and Gibson, 2016). The study found the important role family played in helping students produce an individual story that disparaged the troublesome generalizations related to race and disability (Banks & Gibson, 2016). Banks and Gibson (2016) found if students of color with disabilities feel genuinely connected to the campus culture, this will, in turn, increase retention. The theme of campus belonging is in line with DaDeppo's (2009) study that found academic and social belonging were factors in predicting if a student with a disability would persist in college. Banks and Gibson (2016) also found if students of color with disabilities feel authentically connected to the campus culture, this increases retention. Additionally, Banks and Gibson (2016) concluded that the disability support services that considered culture and the direct involvement of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were vital for the success of African Americans with disabilities. Banks and Gibson (2016) asserted the small, culturally responsive environment of the HBCU seems to have the ability to be an ideal environment to support the multiple factors that add to the academic success of African American men with learning disabilities.

In Banks's (2017) study, seven African American men labeled with at least one learning disability attending a four-year HBCU. The study found that the feeling of shame about one's disability is a feeling that can follow them persistently from the time of realization of the disability throughout their life (Banks, 2017). Additionally, the study found that African American students with disabilities need self-determination and an understanding of their unique learning needs (Banks, 2017). In comparison, the findings from the previously discussed studies point to clear contributors to success for African American men with learning disabilities attending an HBCU; however, what remains unclear in the literature is the academic and social experiences of African American learning-disabled men that attend a PWI. This study seeks to clarify and highlight these experiences.

Parents

Regrettably, just 61% of parents with adolescents who have learning disabilities anticipate their children attending postsecondary education, in contrast to 92% of parents with adolescents without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). Moreover, 33% of adolescents with learning disabilities are expected by their parents to pursue a four-year college program, whereas 88% of those without disabilities are expected to do so (Newman et al., 2011). There is overwhelming evidence in the existing literature that points to the importance of parents and families in the educational journey of African American students (Trainor, 2005). Parents may experience a great deal of stress when faced with their young adult's transition period into postsecondary education (Miller et al., 2018; Banks & Gibson, 2016). Studies have found that this transition period to be one of the most trying times for a family and the student. The assistance offered by African American families to young adults is essential for a smooth transition from school to college life and assuming adult responsibilities particularly for students with learning disabilities (Banks, 2014).

Parental involvement, often recognized as a key determinant of successful transition, presents a delicate balancing act. Parents navigate the fine line between supporting their young adults' autonomy and independence, while also advocating for them and navigating the complexities of the new challenge of postsecondary arena (Miller et al., 2018; Banks, 2014). Additionally, parents' concerns about the safety of their young adults are acknowledged as a common obstacle in the transition process. This "over-protectiveness" frequently impedes the development of social skills (Banks, 2014). Banks & Gibson, 2016 found the important role family played in helping students produce an individual story that disparaged the troublesome generalizations related to race and disability. What is clear in the literature is that African American parents play an important role in postsecondary experience of their children.

Summary

Despite the increasing enrollment of students with learning disabilities in postsecondary institutions, African American men with learning disabilities remain disproportionately underrepresented. This research contributes to the existing body of literature by examining the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities at postsecondary institutions, considering both student and parental perspectives. Utilizing DisCrit and Ecological Systems theory, this study offers a dynamic framework for exploring the intersection of race, disability, and environmental influences. While the literature acknowledges the potential for this population to construct counter-narratives, challenge disability labels, and emphasizes the pivotal role of parental support, there remains a scarcity of understanding regarding the critical factors influencing their experiences in the postsecondary environment. This study endeavors to bridge this gap in research and enrich the existing body of literature in this field.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological multi-case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. This chapter, broken into multiple sections, describes the methodological procedures used to execute this study. Each section is a building block that forms the methodological structure of the study. The initial section outlines the foundational research questions guiding the study. Subsequently, the chapter provides an overview of the research design, participant recruitment, data gathering, and data analysis processes, as well as the limitations of the methodology.

Overview and Research Questions

The following research questions served as the core focal points of this investigation:

Parent

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

2) What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

3) What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Student

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution?

2) What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?

Methodology

One of the main questions that researchers must answer when starting a study is their philosophical assumptions related to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 19). A constructivist approach aligns closely with my study's ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructivism asserts that there are multiple realities, and we socially construct these realities through our lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016). When embracing multiple perspectives within a framework, some of these viewpoints may clash, and the understanding of reality may change throughout the study (Mertens, 2015). The belief accompanying the constructivist framework encompasses the idea that the reality we understand is complex, interwoven, and ever-changing (Glesne, 2016). When viewing research from a constructivist lens, the purpose is to contextualize, understand, and interpret the data (Glesne, 2016). The constructivist paradigm underscores that research is the product of the researcher's beliefs and cannot be separated from those beliefs (Mertens, 2015).

Research is one of the many ways of understanding the world around us (Mertens, 2015). When designing a research study, a researcher makes multiple critical decisions. I chose to employ qualitative research methodology. The general purpose of qualitative research is to understand how people interpret their lives and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research methodologies are effective because they contribute to the voices of marginalized groups that are often disregarded in quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013). A salient feature of all qualitative research is how individuals build reality in relation to their social environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Phenomenology

As a research methodology, phenomenology allows us to study how we exist in relation to others (Vagel, 2018). Phenomenology is an approach used when it is essential to comprehend the collective experience of a particular group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological research is an exhaustive examination of an issue or experience marked by a few homogeneous participants (Glesne, 2016). Specifically, the phenomenological method searches for meaning in experiences rather than in measurements and rationalizations (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology aims to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of everyday phenomena, using first-person accounts and conversational speech (Husserl, 1931; Vagel, 2018). The benefit of phenomenology is that it will magnify the voices of my participants and produce a rich dataset that gives depth to the research findings (Mertens, 2015).

Philosophers Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz developed phenomenology early in the 20th century (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016). Husserl used the term phenomenology to refer to the study of how people experience things through their senses (Husserl, 1931). Husserl asserted that a phenomenon was a specific thing, not a generic estimation, representation, or reduced outcome (Vagel, 2018).

There are many phenomenological approaches to choose from, and two methods include hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Each method operates under different philosophical assumptions and data analysis methods (Moustakas, 1994). This study uses Husserl's qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1931). The transcendental approach is recommended for researchers who have not done phenomenological research before because it provides a straightforward, structured, systematic approach to analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Husserl's phenomenology emphasizes the need to bracket the world so that the structure of the phenomena experienced in consciousness can be carefully explained (Vagel, 2018). Epoché (also referred to as bracketing), a Greek word meaning “to stay away from or abstain,” is a concept in which investigators set aside their experiences as much as possible and take a fresh perspective on the phenomena under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). However, using epoché can be difficult due to the rigid nature of the method. Karin Dahlberg created the term bridling as a more modest alternative to bracketing (Vagel, 2018). Bridling describes what researchers should do with their assumptions and preconceived notions concerning a phenome (Vagle, 2009). Dahlberg commented that bracketing was a “once and for all” methodology. As an alternative methodology, Dahlberg, a horseback riding enthusiast, likened the bridling method to tightening and loosening the reigns when riding a horse, which the researcher must do with their judgment concerning a phenom (Vagel, 2018). Vagle (2009) asserts that “bridling does not remove, set aside, or render the researcher non-influential as bracketing implies, but animates and illuminates the researcher more fully in his or her intentional relationship with the phenomenon” (p. 592). Researchers who use bridling maintain continuous openness to their own understanding throughout the research process (Vagel, 2018). Due to the personal experiences that I brought to the topic, I used a bridling method to remain open to how the phenomena revealed and concealed itself (Vagel, 2018).

The researcher selected a descriptive phenomenological perspective as the method of obtaining and analyzing data for this study (Moustakas, 1994). This approach required the researcher to engage in a methodical and efficient way to minimize any preconceived notions related to the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) outlines the following steps: identify a phenomenon, bracket/bridle out any prejudices concerning the phenomena, collect data from the participants that have experienced the phenom, analyze the data by reducing the information into noteworthy statements, and combine those statements into themes. The descriptive phenomenological approach focuses less on the interpretation and more on the description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This type of phenomenology collectively produced rich textural and structural descriptions to express the entire essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Case Study

Case study methodology is a type of design that investigates a phenomenon extensively within its real-world setting. When the researcher desires to understand a complex social phenomenon, the case study permits the integration of as many methods as possible to explore a contemporary situation (Yin, 2018). Therefore, I have chosen to utilize a descriptive phenomenological case study methodology. Case study research begins with the aspiration of obtaining an intimate, in-depth view of a small number of "cases" set in their regular, real-world environment (Yin, 2012). The detailed look into the phenomena aims to produce a deep understanding and insight into the real-world behavior of the participants in hopes of acquiring new knowledge (Yin, 2012). Phenomenological case studies are a methodology within qualitative research that seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals within a particular phenomenon or situation (Yin 2018). This method investigates the meanings that individuals assign to their lived experiences.

Phenomenological case studies begin with an in-depth examination of the phenomenon under investigation. As outlined by Yin (2018), researchers should clearly define the parameters of the case and articulate the questions that guide the investigation. Within the realm of phenomenology, this entails pinpointing the distinct experiences or lived realities individuals have encountered within the phenomenon.

Phenomenological case studies highlight the significance of understanding the context within which experiences unfold. Researchers must account for the socio-cultural, historical, and situational influences that mold participants' perceptions and interpretations of their realities (Yin, 2018). By following the principles outlined by Yin (2018), researchers can conduct phenomenological case studies that offer richly detailed descriptions and provide a solid understanding of real-life phenomena.

Yin's (2014) explanation of the multi-case study approach underscores its significance in qualitative research methodology. This approach involves the examination of multiple cases to derive broad insights into a phenomenon. Unlike single-case studies, which focus on a singular instance, multi-case studies facilitate the exploration of diverse perspectives and contexts (Yin, 2018). By analyzing multiple cases, researchers can identify patterns within and across cases, deepening the understanding of the phenomena. Additionally, the multi-case study approach allows for the exploration of multifaceted interrelationships. Largely, Yin's (2014) portrayal underlines the methodological rigor and richness found in the multi-case study design.

Researcher Role

An intriguing and distinct aspect of qualitative research involves the researcher serving as the primary instrument for both data collection and interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the primary investigator, my responsibilities included designing the study, collecting, analyzing, and safeguarding data, identifying suitable participants, maintaining the anonymity of my participants, and creating a comfortable environment for my participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Acting as a tool in the research process, the qualitative researcher engages in meaning-making activities (Vagle, 2018). Moreover, the objective of this research is comprehension, and the presence of a human researcher enables immediate clarification and summarization during data collection. Additionally, the researcher can verify accuracy with participants and pose supplementary questions in real time to delve into unusual or deserving areas for deeper investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As the mother of three Black boys with learning disabilities, this research holds personal significance for me. I recognize that my experiences in navigating the K-12 educational system, advocating for my children, and assisting parents of children with learning disabilities may offer a distinct perspective on understanding my participants and interpreting my findings. Glenese (2016) suggests that one of the researcher's roles is to present themselves in a manner that fosters acceptance and belonging. I believe that sharing my story was instrumental in helping participants feel at ease sharing their own experiences and accepting me.

Another crucial role of the researcher is that of a learner—to suspend preconceptions and approach each interaction as a student (Glenese, 2016). In every interview, I endeavored to keep an open mind, ready to absorb the lived experiences of the participants (Vagle, 2018). Despite having prior knowledge of the topic, I embraced the role of a learner, refraining from imposing assumptions or anticipating responses (Glenese, 2016). My sole aim was to allow participants to educate me about their experiences, without judgment or bias.

Researcher's Positionality Statement

I am an African American female, born and raised in the inner city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was raised in a lower-middle-class home by a single mother. I enjoyed the dichotomy of living in the inner city while also attending private schools with students outside of my ethnic, economic, and geographical identity. I grew up in a family with multiple educators. All my holidays were spent around the dining room table discussing current issues in education and how to fix them. My mother and aunts frequently talked about their battle to save Black children in the public school system. They spoke about the systemic injustices and how some

White teachers negatively treated Black students. They discussed how Black boys were targeted and labeled troublemakers while their educational needs were ignored. I must acknowledge that these conversations are forever ingrained in my psyche and have shaped some of my assumptions about education and access.

My positionality concerning my research interest is highly personal. The lack of research on African American learning-disabled men is a topic that hits close to home. My African American sons and the men in my community are the inspiration for my research. I fulfill roles as aunt and Godmother to Black men with learning disabilities who pursued postsecondary education but were unable to complete their studies. Furthermore, I am a mother of three young African American men with learning disabilities (LD). Two have a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and the third has a diagnosis of ADHD and dyslexia. I am their educational advocate, and I have experienced first-hand how challenging it is to navigate the K-12 system for children with special needs. I have experienced how quickly the system labeled my children as “bad” and “slow.” The public school system was satisfied to pass my child with ADHD and dyslexia from one grade to the next without having the ability to read fluently. I will always remember the tears I shed trying to figure out how to meet the learning needs of my children. I thought the school system was supposed to be the expert on special education; however, I quickly learned it was vital for me to understand what my children needed and how to get it. I will never forget my son’s first-grade teacher, a White woman, who, when I asked what I could do to help my son, replied, “This is all the potential he would reach.” Would she have said that to me if I were a White woman?

I assume African American men with learning disabilities who advance to higher education have faced hardship and adversity to make it through the doors of postsecondary institutions. I believe they have faced remarkable racism and ableism. I also assume they have a significant level of support and a champion advocate to make it to postsecondary education. I am sensitive about this topic because I have experienced considerable pain due to the comments and actions of educators and people close to me. I am biased because I believe the system is set up to fail Black boys doubly if they are learning disabled. I have the experience of being extremely frustrated and not knowing what actionable steps to take for my children's education. Sitting on the other side of the table of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings felt like I was going to war for my children because they were entangled in a system that did not care about them.

Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 10 participants including African American men with learning disabilities attending postsecondary education and parents of African American men with learning disabilities attending postsecondary institutions. I had six parent participants and four son participants. All the son participants had at least one parent participate in the interview process. I had one parent participant whose son chose not to participate in the study. Two of the parent participants are husband and wife and were interviewed separately. The following tables represent the demographic information of the participants in the study.

Table 1

Parent Participants Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Parents Highest Level of Education	Child's Diagnosis	Child' s Year in Postsecondary Education
Ava	55	Female	Doctorate degree	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyscalculia	< 5 years

Table 2 (continued)

Parent Participants Demographics

Name	**Age**	**Gender**	**Parents Highest Level of Education**	**Child's Diagnosis**	**Child' s Year in Postsecondary Education**
Daniel	57	Male	Master's degree	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and processing disorder	Second year
Eve	53	Female	Bachelor's degree	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), processing disorder, and speech disorder	First year
Kerry	51	Female	Master's degree	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and specific learning disorder	Third year
Lisa	57	Female	Bachelor's degree	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and processing disorder	Second year
Terri	51	Female	3 years of postsecondary education	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), specific learning disorder, and 22q deletion syndrome/DiGeorge syndrome	First year

Table 2

Student Participants Demographic Information

Name	**Age**	**Diagnosis**	**Year**	**Major**	**Postsecondary Institution**	**Postsecondary Institution Location**
Adam	19	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), processing disorder, and speech disorder	First year	Engineering	Two-year community college	Southern United States

Table 2 (continued)

Student Participants Demographic Information

Name	**Age**	**Diagnosis**	**Year**	**Major**	**Postsecondary Institution**	**Postsecondary Institution Location**
Corey	26	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyscalculia	< 5 years	Criminal justice	Four-year Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	Online
Dillion	19	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), specific learning disorder, and 22q deletion syndrome/ DiGeorge syndrome	First year	Computer science	Four-year Historically Black College/ University (HBCU)	Southern United States
Michael River	22	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), processing disorder, and social anxiety	Second year	Graphic art/ animation	Four-year Predominately White Institution (PWI)	Southern United States

Table 3

Case Study Participants Parent/ Child Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Child's Diagnosis	Child's Year in Postsecondary Institution	Child's Postsecondary Institution
Daniel	59	Male	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), processing disorder, and social anxiety	Second year	Four-year Predominately White Institution (PWI)
Lisa	57	Female			
Michael River	22	Male			
Ava	59	Female	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyscalculia	< 5 Years	Four-year Predominately White Institution (PWI)
Corey	26	Male			
Terri	59	Female	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Specific learning disorder, and 22q deletion syndrome/DiGeorge syndrome	First Year	Four-year Historically Black College/University (HBCU)
Dillion	19	Male			
Eve	53	Female	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), processing disorder, and speech disorder	First year	Two-year community college
Adam	19	Male			
Kerry	51	Female	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and specific learning disorder	Third year	Four-year Historically Black College/University (HBCU)
Child did not participate		Male			

Recruitment Strategy

This study underwent a thorough review and approval process by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval indicates that an impartial assessment of the study was conducted to ensure that participants are not subjected to harm. Due to initial challenges in recruiting participants, the study underwent multiple amendments and received IRB approval after revisions. Initially, the study focused solely on African American men with learning disabilities at predominantly White four-year institutions, resulting in only two participants. To broaden the participant pool, the criteria expanded to include both four-year and two-year institutions and men who were either currently enrolled or previously enrolled. Despite these adjustments, recruitment efforts did not yield additional participants. Consequently, the focus of the study shifted from students to parents, as some eligible students were hesitant to participate.

Leveraging my connections within the community, particularly through my son's school, enabled me to identify parents willing to participate. Upon engaging with these parents, I explained the study's evolution and recruitment challenges. Subsequently, the parents expressed willingness to involve their sons in the study. Their assistance was pivotal in recruiting the sons, ultimately facilitating the inclusion of both student and parent perspectives. The study underwent several rounds of review before culminating in the final design, which involved interviewing both students and parents.

My initial participant recruitment strategy included all 50 States, 17 territories, and Washington D.C. My pilot study taught me that recruiting participants is challenging. Furthermore, considering the subject of my study, which involved soliciting participants to contemplate a deeply personal topic, I allocated a significant geographical search radius. Initially, I implemented a three-tier recruitment strategy. The first strategy was institutional recruitment. The second strategy was my personal and community network. The final strategy was social media.

Institution Recruitment

A large part of my initial recruitment efforts focused on one university community. At this institution, I scheduled a meeting with the Associate Director of The Office of Disabilities Services. I met with the Associate Director to get their input on how to reach my target population. I sent my recruitment materials to post in their office and put on the office's social media page. Additionally, I sent a description of my study to key university personnel in The Office of Academic Diversity and Inclusion as well as the Counseling Center. I asked them to forward my invitation to potential participants who may qualify for my study. Further, I made a list of 50 institutions of various sizes throughout the United States, picked at random, and emailed the key personnel in the Offices of Disability requesting that they share my study.

Personal Recruitment

I sent out emails to my contact list describing my study and asking if they could pass my recruitment materials to anyone, they knew who might participate in my study. I also posted on all my social media pages asking my personal network to help me recruit. I recruited three participants through personal recruitment.

Online Recruitment

I posted my flyer in various groups on Facebook that were related to my specified population.

Initially, my recruitment efforts resulted in the enrollment of three participants. To expand the participant pool of my study, I tapped into my personal connections within my son's K-12 school community. Leveraging this network proved fruitful, as it facilitated the identification and engagement of an additional seven participants.

Recruitment Procedures

Potential participants received a screening questionnaire to determine their eligibility for the study. Upon receipt of the completed questionnaire, the researcher assessed whether the candidate met the criteria. Candidates who met the criteria were notified via email of their eligibility to participate in the study. The email contained the informed consent document and requested the participant to schedule a Zoom interview. After scheduling the interview, participants received a confirmation email containing the Zoom link and a copy of the interview questions for their review beforehand, allowing them additional time to process the questions if needed.

Before the interview, participants selected a pseudonym. The researcher updated all transcription titles with the chosen pseudonyms. A password-protected file, accessible only to the researcher during the data analysis phase, secured the master list linking the pseudonyms to the participants. To further safeguard the privacy and anonymity of participants, the researcher omitted any mention of the colleges or universities the participants attended from the transcriptions. As a token of appreciation, each participant received a $25 gift card at the conclusion of their interview.

Data Collection Process

Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview via Zoom. The duration of the interview varied depending on the participant. The student participants' interview on average lasted 50 minutes. However, the parents' interview lasted on average 90 minutes. The aim of these interviews was to grasp the perspectives and experiences of African American men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level and their parents. This was achieved through probing questions designed to delve deeply into their thoughts and encounters. Opting for a semi-structured approach provided participants with the liberty to articulate their narratives in their own terms (Mertens, 2015). Prior to each interview, participants received an email confirmation containing the interview questions, allowing them time to contemplate their responses. Before recording, participants provided consent, and the researcher reiterated the interview's purpose and process, obtaining verbal consent once more. Participants were assured that video recordings would be promptly erased after the interview, retaining only the audio for transcription. Following the interview, the video footage was deleted, and the audio was forwarded for transcription to the transcription service, with both files securely stored.

When crafting phenomenological research, it is imperative for the researcher to maintain a healthy skepticism of what they discover in the findings (Vagle, 2018). Throughout the interview process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to acknowledge and address any biases. This reflective tool served to constantly remind the researcher to remain impartial. After each interview, I made reflective entries, documenting the participant's experiences and the potential implications of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Journaling helped me reflect on how I viewed the data in connection to my biases. The bridling method allowed me to remain open and avoid making quick, definitive judgments (Vagle, 2018). My reflexive practice provided me the opportunity to state my thoughts and opinions, filtering out my preconceived notions to maintain the credibility of my findings. The reflective journal was instrumental in recognizing and mitigating biases that may have emerged during data collection.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data, and in that process, the researcher consolidates, reduces, and interprets the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analyzing qualitative research data involves preparing and organizing the data before systematically reducing the information into thematic elements using a coding and condensation process (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, the researcher analyzed the data using the following steps.

1. The researcher listened to the recording while following along with the written transcription of the interview. The researcher corrected any places in the transcription that did not accurately reflect the audio from the participants' interviews.
2. After finalizing the transcription, the researcher uploaded it into NVivo 14, a qualitative analysis software program. Using NVivo 14 ensured consistency in the coding and categorizing process (Maxwell, 2013).
3. The researcher then read the transcription and began the process of open coding. Open coding allowed the researcher to be open to any themes or patterns that emerged from the data without reliance on the research questions to direct the data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher read each participant interview in one sitting to ensure they gained a holistic view of the participant.
4. Following each participant interview, the researcher made reflection notes. Then created a bulleted list of most salient points from the interview and noted any questions. This type of reflection throughout the data analysis process provided a rational, methodical, and logical resource to yield relevant descriptions of the participant's experiences (Moustakas, 1994).
5. The researcher summarized each transcription to maintain a holistic view of each participant.
6. Reading of the data occurred on different days to review the data from a fresh perspective. The researcher reflected on the emerging codes and categories.

7. First, the researcher engaged in open coding, which involves tagging all data units that may be pertinent to the study. During open coding in NVivo 14, the researcher highlighted anything in the data that seemed interesting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
8. The initial coding phase resulted in over two hundred codes; a secondary phase of analysis axial coding was performed, which is the process of breaking multiple codes into categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).
9. Following axial coding, the researcher reached out to the participants via phone to discuss the emergent themes. This is a way to validate the data also called member checking (Mertens, 2015).
10. The researcher then analyzed the categories across all parent participants to create parent themes (Yin, 2012).
11. The researcher subsequently analyzed the categories across all student participants to create student themes (Yin, 2012).
12. The researcher lastly analyzed the categories across both parents' and students' categories to create cross case themes (Yin, 2012).

Analysis and recommendations can be found in Chapters 4 and 5 correspondingly.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness stems from vigilance about the caliber and thoroughness of a study. Researchers use many strategies to guarantee the reliability of their findings (Glesne, 2016). Due to the potentially subjective nature of qualitative research collection and analysis, the researcher employed multiple procedures to ensure the study's authenticity, trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One of the first strategies they used was member checking. Member checking, also known as respondent validation, is a technique where participants give feedback on the researcher's preliminary findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Maxwell (2013), member checking is one of the most important steps a researcher can take to minimize the possibility of misinterpreting the participants' data. After transcribing each interview and noting some initial impressions and arising themes, I reviewed my notes over the phone with my participants. I requested their feedback to ensure my impressions aligned with their lived experiences. This process strengthened the credibility of my findings.

A thorough review from a peer proficient in qualitative data analysis further fortified the study's credibility. The peer reviewer read the data and the applied analysis after I reviewed all the transcriptions and performed the initial data analysis. I asked the peer to do one review of my analysis. Their scrutiny countered any biases in my conclusions by viewing the data from an impartial perspective. The peer review verified that the analysis aligned with the study's research questions and intended purpose.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, there was a concern that obtaining in-depth information from student participants might be hindered due to potential communication challenges stemming from their learning disabilities. To address this, the study was designed to mitigate such issues by providing the students with the interview questions beforehand, thus allowing ample time for them to contemplate their responses. The researcher also adjusted the phrasing of questions as necessary and allowed participants sufficient time to formulate and articulate their answers during the interviews. Moreover, the interviews represent a small group of young men and their parents. Furthermore, the sample also represents a small geographical location because all the participants attended schools in the Southern United States. The findings cannot be generalized to all people identifying with the studied sample.

Risk, Benefits, and Ethical Considerations

Protecting participants was one of the highest priorities of this study. Therefore, the transcriptions did not contain any identifying information, including but not limited to names, email addresses, or telephone numbers. The transcriptions also omitted the names of the participants' institutions. This added another layer of anonymity for the participants. Additionally, all study documents contained pseudonyms for the participants, and I secured the pseudonym list separately from the other study data. I stored all data in my Google Drive, a secure file storage platform offering end-to-end encryption and requiring strong passwords.

The intention of this study was to investigate the postsecondary education journey of African American men with learning disabilities and their parents, exploring their experiences and perceptions. A risk of this study was the potential for participants to feel uncomfortable discussing race, gender, or disability. I asked participants to reflect on their lived experiences. The questions had the potential to evoke shame or unpleasant emotions. To account for any discomfort, I tried to make each participant feel as safe as possible by discussing my personal connection to the topic. Sharing my personal connection helped me build rapport with my participants.

Additionally, I tried to create a warm, welcoming, and friendly environment by being relaxed and conversational with my participants. I let participants skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. I also allowed the participants to take breaks during the interview if needed. Finally, I used affirming verbal and non-verbal communication with all participants.

A potential benefit of this study is that my participants had the opportunity to share their lived experiences in a supportive, welcoming, and confidential space. In addition, the data collected will expand the small body of literature surrounding the experiences of African

American men with learning disabilities in postsecondary education, as well as their parents. Furthermore, the findings from this study can inform policies and practices that support the needs of African American men with learning disabilities.

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used in this research study. Discussed in this chapter was an overview of the data collection and analysis techniques, as well as the protection of human subjects, trustworthiness, and limitations. In addition, this study uses a phenomenological approach to answer the research questions: (1) What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution? (2) What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?
(3) What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level? (4) What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level? (5) What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This chapter discusses the results of the participant interviews. The purpose of this phenomenological multi case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. The following research questions served as the focal points of this investigation:

Parent

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

2) What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

3) What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Student

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution?

2) What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?

This chapter begins with a biographical description of each participant. Following this, I define the significant themes that emerged from the data, ensuring that readers grasp the researcher's intent behind its selection. Each theme is accompanied by significant quotes substantiating the rationale behind the creation of the theme, culminating in an interpretation of these quotes as it relates to the theme. This section adheres to the outlined structure across all significant findings. The chapter concludes with a summary of the noteworthy findings and a glimpse into the subsequent chapter.

Parent Participants

Ava - Parent Participant #1

Ava, a 57-year-old woman with a doctorate degree in urban education, owns a consulting business. Ava is the mother of Corey. Corey is Ava's only son and only child with a learning disability. Corey has a diagnosis of ADHD and Dyscalculia. Although Ava noticed some inattention in Corey at an early age, his diagnosis did not come until middle school. Corey resisted taking medication, telling his mother he did not like the way that it made him feel. Ava allowed Corey not to take medication in exchange for Corey following a strict organizational regime that Ava created for Corey to follow. Around the time of Corey's diagnosis Ava went through a divorce and moved to a different state. Ava did not consult Corey's father much concerning how to support Corey.

Daniel - Parent Participant

Daniel, a 59-year-old man with a master's degree, is the father of Michael River. Daniel is currently pursuing his doctoral degree in divinity. Daniel is a pastor of a church. Daniel is married to Lisa and has three children. Michael River is their youngest child and their only child with a learning disability. Daniel was the only father that participated in the study. Before his son was born, the doctors suggested to him and his wife to consider abortion due to potential severe intellectual disabilities. Daniel and Lisa decided to trust God and proceed with the birth of their son and they vowed to one another to support him no matter what challenges he may face. Michael River was misdiagnosed and did not have severe mental limitations. However, their son was diagnosed as learning disabled. To provide the most appropriate level of support for their son's needs, they enrolled their son in a private school that specialized in teaching children with learning differences. Additionally, Daniel and Lisa provided an environment that emphasized African American pride and excellence.

Lisa - Parent Participant #3

Lisa, a 57-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree, is the mother of Michael River. Michael River is Lisa's youngest child and only child with a learning disability. Lisa has three children. Lisa is married to Daniel. Lisa recounts early challenges, including medical suggestions to abort Michael River due to potential mental deficiencies, which turned out to be unfounded. Despite challenges, Lisa and her husband aimed for Michael River to attend college, leading him to his present university where he found success and acceptance. Lisa discusses the differences in parenting a child with a diagnosis, emphasizing the need for intentional support and protection.

Eve - Parent Participant #4

Eve, a 53-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree, is the mother of Adam. Eve has two sons. Adam is Eve's oldest son and only son with a learning disability. Adam struggles with speech delay, processing disorder, and attention deficit disorder (ADHD). Eve noticed when Adam was young that he had a delay in speech, however she was not initially worried because her husband also had a delay in speech when he was younger. Eve's mother-in-law assured her that it was not a problem and eventually Adam would speak like his father did. Adam's speech delays persisted, and Eve began to pursue resources to support her son. Eve discusses how she and her husband decided to move states in search of getting the appropriate resources and education for her son. Eve highlights the challenges she faced in getting appropriate support for her son in public schools, including discrepancies in the implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and the lack of resources.

Terri - Parent Participant #5

Terri, a 51-year-old woman with three years of postsecondary education, is the mother of Dillion. Terri's son Dillion was born prematurely and later diagnosed with 22Q/DiGeorge Syndrome and ADHD. Despite initial challenges with medical professionals dismissing her concerns about her son's development, Terri persisted and sought out specialists, eventually leading to a diagnosis. Dillion is Terri's only son with a learning disability. Terri's proactive approach to advocating for her son's needs, including obtaining full guardianship and seeking community support, demonstrates her dedication to ensuring his well-being.

Kerry - Parent Participant #6

Kerry, a 51-year-old woman with a master's degree, is the mother of Jacob who attends a 4-year Historically Black University in the southern part of the United States. Her son is in his third year of postsecondary education, and this is his third institution that he has attended. Kerry's son chose not to participate in the study. Kerry is a mother to two children. Jacob is Kerry's oldest child and only child with a learning disability. Jacob has attention deficit disorder (ADD) and learning disabilities. Kerry's son Jacob had a major car accident which led to some major setbacks academically. Kerry is hopeful that Jacob will find successful postsecondary completion at the current HBCU he is attending.

Student Participants

Adam - Student Participant #1

Adam is a 19-year-old man with a diagnosis of a processing disorder, speech disorder, and ADHD. Adam is a first year Engineering student at a 2-year community college in the southern part of the United States. Adam's interview revealed his decision to attend a Community College for a two-year civil engineering program. Adam expresses his career aspirations in sustainability and plans to transfer to a four-year university after completing his program. He mentions considering various universities for transfer and expresses confidence in making friends and engaging in activities outside of school. Throughout the interview, Adam reflects on his academic journey and personal growth since his time in K-12 education.

Adam's interview was not as in depth as the other participants due to some barriers to communication caused by his disability. I spoke with him for 25 minutes and gleaned as much information as possible. While I could have chosen to leave his interview out because of this challenge; I thought that it was important for him to tell his narrative in the best way that he knew how, and his voice deserves to be heard.

Corey - Student Participant #2

Corey is a 26-year-old man with a diagnosis of ADHD and Dyscalculia. He is currently at a four-year predominately White institution (PWI) online. Corey previously studied at another four-year PWI in the southern United States. Corey was attracted to the institution because he wanted to wrestle in college. Corey spent a great deal of his time while at this institution with the wrestling team and the bulk of his friendships were with his fellow teammates. Corey began to experience academic struggle at this institution and had to discontinue his studies. After some time, Corey began to pursue his bachelor's degree online while holding full-time employment. Corey had been pursuing his bachelor's degree for more than five years at the time of the interview.

Corey shares his passion for sports, detailing his involvement in various athletic activities from a young age through college, including wrestling and coaching. Corey discusses his academic path, including his decision to major in Homeland Security and later to criminal justice when he transferred to the online university. He explains his reasons for choosing these majors, influenced by his interest in crime shows and his desire to work in law enforcement.

Dillion - Student Participant #3

Dillion is a 19-year-old man and has a diagnosis of ADHD, a specific learning disorder, and DiGeorge Syndrome. Dillion is a first year computer science major at a four-year HBCU in the southern part of the United States. Dillion was able to secure a walk-on position on the basketball team. Dillion is part of a specialized program at his postsecondary institution that provides extra supports such as mentors for learning disabled students. Dillon shares positive experiences with friendships and support systems on campus. Despite setbacks, such as losing the freshman class president election, Dillon remains optimistic about his college experience and future goals.

Michael River - Student Participant #4

Michael River is a 22-year-old man and has a diagnosis of ADHD, processing disorder, and social anxiety. Michael River is a second year graphic art and animation major at a four-year PWI in the southern United States. Michael River describes himself as ambitious, anxious, and creative. Michael's decision to attend college was influenced by his love for art and animation, inspired by various artists and animators. He initially wanted to attend an HBCU like his brother but chose arts and design school for its animation program. He maintains friendships from K-12 and has been in a relationship with his girlfriend for five years, planning to get married after college. At arts and design school, Michael enjoys the school culture, although the workload is overwhelming, especially during finals. Michael's favorite activities include drawing, reading comics/manga, and reviewing movies/shows with his sister.

Table four below provides a summary of the themes and cross theme presented in this chapter.

Table 4

Summary of Emergent Themes

Parent Themes	Student Themes	Cross-Case Themes
Bubble Wrap Parenting • *Non-Disclosure of Diagnosis* • *Over Protection*	**Right in the Middle of the Dichotomy** • *Normalcy vs. Disability* • *Support vs. Independence*	**Higher Education Goals**
		Self-Disclosure the Key to Access
		Seeking Normalcy
		Racism
The Changing of the Guard • *Proud and Concerned* • *Help Maybe* • *Parental Roles***:** Putting In Work, Asking the Right Questions, Support on Standby	**The Juggling Act** • *Friendships and Extracurricular Activities* • *The Struggle is Real*	
In the Intersection of Black and Disabled • *Black Man Walking* • *Black and Disabled Oh My!*		

Themes

The total of 10 participants, four students and six parents, shared openly concerning their perceptions and experiences navigating postsecondary education. As well, the six parents discussed supporting a son navigating postsecondary education. I will first discuss the three themes that emerged from the parent's data which includes, (1) Bubble Wrap Parenting, (2) The Changing of the Guard, and (3) In the Intersection of Black and Disabled. Afterward, I will examine two themes arising from the students' data, including (1) Right in the Middle of the Dichotomy and (2) The Juggling Act. The chapter will conclude with a cross case analysis of the parent and student data with themes including (1) Higher Education Goals, (2) Self-Disclosure the Key to Access, (3) Seeking Normalcy, and (4) Racism.

Parent Themes

Theme 1: Bubble Wrap Parenting

Over the span of several years, the parents have devoted themselves wholeheartedly to methodically steering their children's educational journeys, starting from the moment of diagnosis, and extending through the process of remediation. Through this journey, they have navigated through a multitude of specialists, sought out the assistance of private tutors, and actively engaged in the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Their daily lives have revolved around providing unwavering support to ensure their children successfully navigate the challenges of the K-12 educational system.

Beyond academic concerns, these parents have also invested an abundance of time and effort into assisting their children in coping with the social pressures that accompany their educational experiences. Driven by a profound understanding of their child's unique needs, they have spared no effort in shielding their child from the possibility of failure, tirelessly supplying them with the necessary resources and encouragement for achievement.

Their unwavering commitment to their child's well-being has resulted in a parenting style characterized as "bubble wrap parenting," wherein the children are enveloped in an environment of intense nurturing and protection. This approach is particularly noticeable in the context of their children's learning disabilities. Within the overarching theme of “bubble wrap parenting,” two distinct categories emerge: (1) non-disclosure of diagnosis and (2) over protection.

Non-Disclosure of Diagnosis

Non-disclosure of diagnosis describes the parents’ reluctance to share the information of their child’s diagnosis with people outside the nuclear family. The theme talks about the ways that they have shielded their sons' lives from scrutiny that might come with having any disability, especially a disability that is invisible. This non-disclosure shows up as a form of a protective barrier from stigma, trauma, and hurt from the outside world.

Three of the participants explicitly expressed how they did not disclose their son's diagnosis as a form of protection. Daniel reflects on this decision:

> *we just knew that we wanted to protect our son. So, it wasn't like this big conversation. It was just instinctual. We like, hey, we are not telling anybody. We're going to protect our son because there are some family members who may not get it and the possibility of being stigmatized, we did not want that at all. So, it never required some sit down at the table, let's talk about it. We just kind of said, hey, looked at each other. Hey, we're not talking about this.*

Not sharing his son's diagnosis was a protective barrier that Daniel and his wife maintained to provide safety for their son. The barrier of non-disclosure sheltered their son from judgement. Daniel and his wife knew that judgement could be possible by their closest family members. This judgement could affect their son's self-image and self-esteem, and this was a situation that the parents were not willing to risk. The decision to keep the diagnosis undisclosed provided safety and protection. Daniel never wanted his son to be stigmatized for having the label of the diagnosis. Both he and his wife explicitly expressed to one another that they were not going to disclose this diagnosis as a form of solidarity for the protection of their son. Daniel remained resolute in his commitment to shield his son from any potential stigma associated with the diagnosis. He was adamant that he did not want his son burdened with the label of the diagnosis. Both Daniel and his wife openly communicated their mutual agreement not to disclose the diagnosis, as a means of safeguarding their son.

Daniel expressed that not even Michael Rivers' grandparents knew about his diagnosis. He talks about how there was no need to disclose because people could not tell that his son had a diagnosis. This ties into the son's desire to establish and maintain normalcy, which will be discussed later. Daniel was laying the foundation for his son to be as "normal" as possible. Daniel fiercely guarded his son's narrative from the outside world so his son would have the opportunity to create and shape his own, free from the bias of others.

Lisa also shared a similar sentiment when asked about her feelings around her son's diagnosis,

> *So, even to the extent that we didn't quite disclose to our close family members when he was first diagnosed, we did later in years, but we didn't, we just didn't want to leave his narrative to chance.*

Lisa talks about disclosure and the way it was kept away from the close family that she considered trustworthy. Lisa talks about her son's diagnosis and the desire to keep it guarded. The ability for her as a parent and him as a son to control the way people viewed him and portrayed him to others was a necessary protective layer. It appears the sharing of the diagnosis would expose him in a way with which she was not comfortable. It was not until her son was older and had already been able to create a secure identity that she and her husband decided to share his diagnosis with family.

Over Protection

The second category included in "Bubble Wrap Parenting" is over protection. This theme describes the extreme actions parents undertake to support their sons in navigating the typical challenges and everyday occurrences of life. The parents themselves use words such as coddling and hovering to describe this type of behavior. All the parents in the study mentioned overprotective behaviors in parenting their child with a learning disability versus a child without a diagnosis. The parents share stories of how this overprotective behavior showed up during K-12 education and some examples of how it continues in the postsecondary environment. The following quotes exemplify this theme.

Ava reflects on the biggest concern that she had for her son at the postsecondary level. Ava reflects on the journey with her son's education, describing it as a rollercoaster ride. Ava discusses her son's academic struggles, particularly with organization, paper writing, and turning in assignments on time, despite being intelligent:

> *The first year, I remember the first year, I was really like hovering, let me see your classes. What time are they? Put it on your calendar, put it on your phone, hovering. Did you do your homework? And I noticed that it was becoming stressful for him. I was constantly, when is it due? Did you do it? What time did you do? What time is practice? When you're going, did you go to study hall? I was constantly doing that that first year, and he was so done with me. He was like, I just can't deal with this anymore.*

Ava frequently mentions the term "hovering," illustrating her relentless efforts to keep her son on track and organized, recognizing his struggles in that area. Ava discusses earlier in the interview implementing rigid organizational systems during his K-12 years, as her son refused medication, a decision she accepted. However, to aid his organizational challenges, she meticulously devised detailed systems to support him while he was in the household. Ava, like some of the other parent participants expressed anxieties about her son’s ability to be organized at the postsecondary level. This concern caused Ava to constantly try to prevent her son from failing by serving as a remote reminder system. However, her attempts to help inadvertently resulted in her being an overbearing and overprotective presence in his postsecondary experience.

Terri, similarly, to Ava, stays close to her son’s affairs while at college. Terri recounts an incident where her son was called SPED by a group of men at the school while he was socializing. She narrated what action she took,

> *This needs to be addressed and need to be looked into, because I don't want it to be a situation where he gets so upset and so much anxiety where he hurts himself or hurts somebody else. Right. So, so, um, I made sure that I addressed that and I spoke with two counselors, and one counselor did tell me she knew him from the summer, and she said he came to her about a week ago, and she said, are you okay.*

No mother desires to witness her child experiencing emotional or physical distress, especially a mother who has dedicated her life to shielding her son from failure and pain. Upon learning of an incident that spotlighted her son's disability, Terri's instinct to safeguard her son kicked into high gear. Drawing from her past experiences, Terri promptly stepped up to address her son's needs. She took immediate action by reaching out to the counselor at her son's postsecondary institution, initiating a conversation about the issue at hand. Despite her son's reluctance to involve the counselor in addressing the derogatory remark, Terri, accustomed to taking charge of her son's well-being, assumed responsibility and overstepped her bounds. Although her son never explicitly requested her intervention with the counselor, Terri acted autonomously, driven by her predisposition to shield her son from emotional distress. In response, her son resisted his mother's protective efforts and refused to disclose the identity of the individual who made the derogatory comment.

These parents have insulated their sons from a young age, and it shows up as a constant theme in their postsecondary experience. Daniel talks about how he, in response to their son's diagnosis, began to coddle and shelter their son and it continued as he got older. Daniel asserts,

> *I think we may have coddled Michael River a bit more because of that. Now I tell you one where Michael River struggles. Michael River probably struggles in terms of, how should I say it? And we might be partly to blame because we sheltered him.*

Daniel's son's diagnosis prompted him to do more things for his son and treat him with extra care and concern that was not exhibited with his other children. Although well-intentioned, Daniel's overly protective behavior towards his son inadvertently placed him at a disadvantage and reinforced the stereotype that individuals with learning disabilities are less capable. However, this inability to fully develop independence and to transition into adulthood has been a direct consequence of the overprotective approach that Daniel has adopted for his son.

Throughout the K-12 journey of these African American young men, their parents invested significant effort in shielding them from failure and offering extensive support. However, as their sons transition into adulthood, the parents faced the challenge of striking a balance between fostering independence and maintaining a supportive environment conducive to their growth. The upcoming section, "The Changing of the Guard," delves into this evolving parental role and its multifaceted components.

Theme 2: The Changing of the Guard

"The Changing of the Guard" revolves around the transition from "Bubble Wrap" parenting to fostering independence. It probes into the multidimensional aspects of this shift, encompassing various roles, emotions, and challenges faced. It examines how parents adapt their strategies to support this evolving dynamic in their relationship with their sons. They grapple with the struggle of relinquishing their extensive support role, which has been crucial to their sons' success. This theme examines how the drastic change in parental support, from extensive to minimal, impacts both parent and child. It explores parents' concerns about their reduced support role, the son's response to the level of support available, and the defining of the parents' new roles. This section will explore the categories that highlight the overarching theme of "The Changing of the Guard" including (1) proud and concerned, (2) help maybe and (3) parental roles.

Proud and Concerned

"Proud and Concerned" discusses the feelings that the parents have as their sons transition from their locus of control to independence. The parents openly share their joy in witnessing their sons achieve success at the postsecondary level. Then they also discuss the feelings of concern about the facets that are beyond their control and could cause their son to fail. This section investigates the intricate interplay between feelings of pride and concern, illustrating how these emotions coexist as parents' endeavor to adapt to their evolving support roles.

Each of the six parents interviewed conveyed a sense of pride regarding their son's achievements in postsecondary education. These proud instances varied, from their son achieving high grades to demonstrating initiative through self-advocacy. The parents had varying levels of concern for their sons as well.

Lisa recounts an instance that fills her with pride regarding her son's journey toward independence and achievements at the postsecondary level. Specifically, she discusses her son's attempts to find a community where he feels a sense of belonging and can engage in social activities. Lisa notes that her son, who largely spent time at home, primarily socialized with his siblings. She reflects on his proactive efforts to step out of his comfort zone and initiate social interactions with his classmates and foster new connections:

> *He's trying to still find his tribe, but he will do things. If the University is having events, he will go to them, and I'm proud of him for that. He'll just go by himself.*

Lisa is proud of her son for going to events and trying to build a community at school. Michael Rivers' family always provided a place of safety to socialize and had become the community that he engaged in during his time in postsecondary education. Lisa began to worry that her son would not move beyond the family bubble and is proud that her son is now taking a risk and leaving the safety of the family, venturing out to find what she calls "his tribe." This, to Lisa, is a marker that her son is starting to seek independence.

Terri talks about being proud of her son when answering the question "can you tell me about your son's decision to attend college?" Terri replied,

> *You know, that was his choice. And that just really, that just really made me proud. I was like, he can articulate that to someone. And I didn't even, I wasn't even in the conversation. I was just over in the corner. I was like, wow. Okay.*

Terri always dreamed of her son attending college and has always been proud of her African American heritage and has tried to instill the same in her son. So, when Terri's son made the decision to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), she was overjoyed. She was proud that he made this decision independently without her input or prompting. She felt pride for two reasons; Firstly, for him taking the reins and making his own college choice and secondly, when she overheard her son discussing the reasons behind his commitment to attending an HBCU, she was elated. This moment filled Terri with immense pride because she was not directly involved in the conversation, signaling that her son was autonomously making choices aligned with his values, without any external influence from her. It demonstrated his assertiveness in standing by his values in selecting an HBCU for his education.

Ava shared a time of pride when her son was visiting her home, and he was projecting what he needed to get done for the week and what he needed to do to be successful. Ave recounted her son saying,

> *If I don't do it today, I know that it will never get done. It just, I'm giving him credit on that.*

Ava did not explicitly use the word pride in the quote; however, I could infer the pride that she felt as she observed her son independently employing the organizational skills, she had painstakingly imparted to him. It was evident to her that he was utilizing these skills to thrive in the postsecondary setting, and this realization filled her with a gratifying sense of accomplishment.

While each parent experienced moments of pride witnessing their son's journey at the postsecondary level, they also harbored simultaneous concerns. Despite enjoyment being ever-present, these lingering concerns persisted as their sons navigated this unfamiliar terrain with fewer support structures than they were accustomed to. Kerry expressed concern over Jacob’s decision to attend postsecondary education:

> *So, knowing the struggle that Jacob has had since preschool and with writing and with reading and doing all types of tricks and jumps and hoops and everything, John and I had a conversation with him about, we know this is the path that we put you on, but at the end of the day, you have to live your life, go, if you don't have to go to school, you can get a trade. We really don't want you to just go get a job. We want you to get a skill bigger*

> *than just your high school diploma. I really think because Jacob only thing he knew from our upbringing, his upbringing was that college was the next thing.*

Kerry knew firsthand the struggles that her son faced in the K-12 setting and did not want him to face those same challenges in the postsecondary arena. Kerry's concern stemmed from if four-year postsecondary education completion was a realistic goal for her son; although, this was the trajectory and the expectation that she and her husband modeled for him since birth. Kerry feared that the predominant focus on college as the next step might limit his consideration of alternative options. There was concern that this ingrained expectation may compel him to persist in pursuing postsecondary completion despite repeated setbacks, without exploring other possibilities.

Daniel, like Kerry, also had concerns about his son accessing accommodation at his university:

> *I don't think he's gone back and said, I need this. So, he's operating as a regular student, but we were concerned when he first got there that that would be an issue.*

Daniel knows that his son's learning disability in the past dictated that he receives accommodations but was unsure if the same support received in high school would be the same support needed at the postsecondary level. Daniel knows that it is his son's responsibility to request and use the accommodation. Operating as a "normal" student is cause for concern when his son has a documented learning disability. While Daniel is concerned about his son's use of services, he must trust that his son can take the lead in getting the support he needs.

When it came to preparing for college, Ava was deeply involved, offering organizational assistance and emotional support at every turn for her son. However, as Corey entered college, Ava found it difficult to strike a balance between providing support and allowing him to gain independence. Despite her efforts to maintain open communication, challenges emerged due to college privacy laws. As a result, Ava had to rely on Corey's communication and trust to navigate his college experience. Ava mentioned that her biggest concern for her son was how to pull back from supporting him so intensely with his organizational skills. Ava said,

> *So, I was heavily involved because he, with his diagnosis was highly disorganized. And I thought if I just pull back and let him do this on his own, he's going to be spiraling.*

Like many other parents, Ava expresses concerns about the sudden shift in support levels for her son, Corey, as he transitions from receiving extensive support at home to being largely independent with minimal assistance. Corey's refusal to take medication and his reluctance to utilize disability services exacerbate these worries for Ava. Ava is deeply concerned that her son will "spiral" without the level of support to which he is accustomed.

Lastly, concerned about his level of preparation, Lisa shares her thoughts about her son being a self-sustaining adult and her great emotion about sending him off into a challenging and perilous world. She worries that her son will not make it in the world without her support. Lisa's concern for her son's well-being is so profound that she prepares his siblings to be his next level of support if anything were to happen to her and her husband, and their son still has not achieved self-sufficiency.

Help Maybe?

"Help Maybe?" highlights the diversity of experiences with accommodation utilization. This section explores the diverse responses of the sons to receiving accommodations and how parents react to their sons' decisions. Parents reflect on their sons' reluctance to seek help, as well as the challenges they face when assistance is not utilized optimally. Moreover, parents discuss the difficulties their sons encounter when taking the initiative to request accommodation and utilize it effectively. Parents express frustration when their sons do not utilize available accommodations, leading to failing grades, and the sense of helplessness the parents experience. Additionally, the section explores instances where accommodations have been effectively utilized, resulting in positive outcomes for them.

When Kerry was asked about her son Jacob’s decision to attend college, she began to discuss her son accessing accommodations at the first university he attended. Kerry recounts,

> *So, we had to get all those consents signed that so that we could check in on Jacob, make sure he had accommodations, things like that. When they give you the accommodations, it's the student's responsibility to go to the teachers and show them what it is and ask them, can they have these things? Can I have the outline in advance? Can I get the notes in advance? Whatever it is. But when I tell you, they have so much, and you might already know so much technical assistance, support that there's no way no one should not graduate if they have accommodations, if they really ask for what they need. So, I think Jacob had a lot of shame initially around requesting it.*

Although Kerry wanted to jump in and help as she always has done, it was up to her son to request the accommodation that he needed. While Kerry is aware of all the help that is available and so is her son, she cannot force him to get the help. Although it pains her to witness her son not receiving the help he needs, Ava's hands are tied; she can only offer encouragement as she realizes she can no longer intervene on his behalf. Kerry believes that a feeling of shame holds her son back from getting his needs met and is certain that without support her son will not be able to thrive at the postsecondary level.

Kerry then discusses her hopes that the university Jacob is attending will be the final place and he will be able to complete his undergraduate education. This university employs a Black woman counselor at the disability’s office who could be the resource Jacob needs to be successful. She speaks about the counselor seemingly going above and beyond to connect with Jacob and be an available guide through his postsecondary journey. This counselor who reaches out to Jacob and ensures she has a personal connection with him is one of the things that has been working. The counselor gives off the impression that she cares about her son and tells Jacob to come see her regularly whether there is something going on or not. Kerry is hopeful that the close accountability from this counselor is the right level of support Jacob needs to be successful.

Ava was asked how did knowing your son had a diagnosis, but did not receive the support he needed make her feel?

Ava said,

> *It made me really angry at him initially because I would say to him, that's like, if you're sick and you need help, I said, if you're sick and you need same medication, you would go get the medication and you would make yourself feel better. Or if you sprained an ankle, you would go get an ACE bandage and you wrap your ankle up because you want it to heal, feel better. And I would try to give him little analogies like that because it made me angry that he was refusing to help himself. It was a refusal. And the older they get when they're younger, you have so much control over their lives, and the older they get, the control becomes less and less and less and less. And I would say to him, just get the help you need. There is no stigma. Just get the help you need.*

Ava talks about her anger surrounding her son’s refusal to use the services that are available to him. She feels angry because she perceives the refusal to seek help as a refusal to take care of himself. She emphasizes the magnitude of overcoming any stigma associated with seeking help and simply focusing on getting the assistance needed. Overall, the quote reflects Ava’s desire for her son to prioritize his own well-being over any perceived stigma. Knowing that she cannot force help upon him, Ava often sits on the sidelines very frustrated at her son’s choices.

Terri discusses her son's development and challenges as he transitioned to college. She notes his increasing independence and maturity, especially in advocating for himself. Despite obstacles in adjusting to college life, including academic challenges and freedom management, he participated in a summer bridge program for acclimation, as well as a program through disabilities services that were extremely helpful to him adjusting to college.

Terri mentioned that the program enforces that her son goes to tutoring to get assistance with his classwork. So, if he does not do well in that class, he is able to repeat the class without repercussions to his overall grade point average. She also mentioned later in the interview that the program provides mentorship, and this mentorship has been a major source of support for her son. Overall, Terri is extremely pleased at the level of support that the University provides and how her son is taking full advantage of the support.

The section "Help Maybe" illustrates varying experiences that the parents had watching their sons take advantage of the available resources for assistance. While some of the children actively embraced the support systems provided, others chose to refrain from utilizing them. The spectrum of responses showcases a diverse range of attitudes towards seeking help.

Parental Roles

“Parental Roles” explores the multifaceted roles the parents engaged in fostering their son's independence while simultaneously providing a safety net to shield them from failure. While being intimately familiar with their son's strengths and weaknesses, parents adopt various roles such as advocate, cheerleader, motivator, investigator, and life coach to steer their son towards adulthood. Some parents openly admit that trying to support their son in postsecondary education has been in effect harder than when they attended K-12. Now that their son is legally considered an adult and parental access to information is limited, parents contend with navigating this unfamiliar territory while striving to strike a balance between their son's need for independence and support.

Putting In Work

While all the participants did not express the same sentiment concerning how supporting their son at the postsecondary level became harder than before, a few parents shared how the load become heavier. Kerry discusses her son Jacob's struggles with organization, time management, and academic responsibilities in college. She expresses frustration with his tendency to procrastinate, lack of initiative in seeking help, and difficulty with written assignments despite his intelligence. Kerry says,

> *So, I feel like I'm working harder. And so, my goal now at this point is, is that we did that initial connection with school as Jacob, whether it was in school, whether it was with a job, whether it's anything in life. At 22, you have to figure this out. You are going to have to figure out what's important to you. And if that means not getting a four year degree, you're going to have to be okay with that. If it means going to get a job, you're going to be okay with that, that we've supported you through all of these things. But at the same time, we still got work. We got other children, we got our own lives.*

Kerry is uncertain if a four-year university is the best fit for her son. While she does not want to dampen his aspirations or impose limitations on his potential, pursuing a four-year degree has demanded more effort from her than she initially expected. Her frustration is palpable as she explains that, in addition to her own work and responsibilities for other children, she is now heavily involved with helping her son with his assignments. As a devoted parent, she has always advocated for and supported her son's aspirations, but as he transitions into adulthood, her intention is to step back and allow him to take charge, hoping her role will diminish.

However, she finds herself unable to do so; instead, her involvement has intensified, making her question if postsecondary education is the right path for her son.

Later in the interview, Kerry reflects on how her son's time in postsecondary education has been more challenging for her than his K-12 years. She discussed how his poor time management, evidenced by last-minute requests for editing papers before they are due, adds to the strain. Kerry notes that this behavior, coupled with his struggles in writing, places an extra burden on her. She feels stressed by being consistently pulled into his time management issues and acknowledges that his heavy reliance on her support exacerbates the situation.

While Lisa does not explicitly speak about having to help with her sons' assignments, she does speak about having to constantly push him to adulthood. Lisa says,

> *Right now, I feel like I have to keep pushing an adult now, and I want to make sure he can stand on his own. And so, we're really focused on pushing harder than we've probably ever pushed before. But we also recognize that he's a product of our overprotection and we've got to start to wean ourselves and him off of that.*

Lisa recognizes that her son needs to mature and embrace adult responsibilities. She understands that without nudging him towards adulthood, he might remain perpetually ensconced in the familiar comfort of the "nest" that surrounds him. Understanding that she has sheltered him more than her other children, Lisa realizes the necessity of pushing him harder towards independence. However, she admits that this role of pushing him into adulthood presents a significant challenge. She reveals that this push is essential for both her and her son, as they have both grown accustomed to their highly dependent relationship.

Asking the Right Questions

All the parents in the study acknowledge the necessity of loosening their grip and granting their son more autonomy, yet they recognize that their sons still require assistance and occasional reminders to thrive. Instead of resorting to a directive approach, they have intentionally adopted a method of communicating with their sons in the form of asking questions. Five of the parent participants mentioned how they do some form of question asking as a form of support. They discovered that asking questions encouraged their sons to communicate and kept important matters on their radar. Consequently, the parents are better equipped to offer support while allowing their sons the freedom to mature. This section "Asking the Right Questions" highlights the pivotal inquiries the parents ask to strike a balance between fostering their son's independence and providing support.

When Terri was asked the question what things do you do for your son at the postsecondary level? Teri said,

> *Yeah, just making sure, checking in with him. Like, okay, did you, did you sign whatever form you need to sign? Um, are you checking your assignments? You know, it's still reminder. So, we're still prompting, but not as much. Um, check in with us at least once a week. Um, just making sure you do what you need to do. Um, he doesn't really want us to look at his grooming, like, how does your hair, and, you know, why do you need to see me? It's like, I need to see you. So, um, so when I asked him over the weekend before I went up there, I was like, uh, do you need a haircut? No. Then he said, yes. And then when I got there, I was like, oh yeah, you need a haircut.*

Terri employs the strategy of asking her son questions to ensure that he follows through on tasks. By framing her follow-up in the form of questions, she makes her involvement seem less intrusive, granting her son the freedom to assume more adult responsibilities. Initially, these questions serve as conversation starters, encouraging her son to discuss the tasks at hand. Moreover, they help him navigate through his obligations and provide an opportunity for him to vocalize his thoughts on completing them. Furthermore, the questions serve as an additional layer of accountability, all while maintaining a delicate balance between fostering his independence and ensuring that he stays focused on his tasks to achieve success. Providing prompts for her son's tasks has become one of her roles and has proven to be an effective support strategy.

Like Terri, Lisa also asks questions of her son to gently guide him. Terri explains,

> *always ask him, how's it going? Have talked to more questions like, Hey, have you talked to your counselor? Hey, I saw this on the sign. Because often we drop 'em off and pick 'em up. Hey, I saw this. And so, I'm kind of, again, more of the, Hey, did you think about this? Or hey, just asking questions and trying to build on that, but trying to let him do it himself, not me, go do it.*

Lisa follows up with questions to see if her son is keeping up with visits to his counselor. She understands that his counselor is a major source of support, and she does not want him to miss this. Lisa knows she cannot mandate him to see his counselor, so she checks on him by asking questions. This method of questioning fosters open dialogue, granting her son autonomy to reflect on and express his experiences, while allowing Lisa to respect his independence and give him space to manage things on his own.

Ava communicates with her son through text messages, as it is their preferred method of staying connected. She finds texting to be less intrusive, allowing Corey to respond in the presence of friends without feeling embarrassed by his mom's check-ins. Ava recognizes the significance of Corey's social integration with his peers and is careful not to compromise it. Thus, she has adapted her role in questioning to maintain his desire to fit in. Using questions as a means of checks and balances, Ava ensures that her son remains on course without undermining his need for social acceptance.

Support on Standby

“Support on Standby” explores the parents’ various helper roles and how the parents execute the role. When Eve was asked how your role in your son’s postsecondary education has changed since his K through 12, Eve stated,

> *Say stuff on his behalf. I'm thinking. But then again, you want him also to grow into society, so you see how much he can take and how much he can take. Exactly. I'm still there. I'm still there. I mean, I'm sending him out to fish, but I'm still standing right behind the boat. And if it's, I'll just pull it back.*

Eve recognizes the importance of her son's independence and his ability to contribute positively to society. She believes in allowing him to venture out and make his own choices, while emphasizing her role as a safety net, ready to assist if necessary. Though she has granted him the freedom to explore, she remains close by, keeping a watchful eye and ready to offer help or support whenever needed. Eve likens sending her son out into the world to sending him out to fish, illustrating her readiness to provide backup if he encounters any challenges, likening it to "pulling the boat back."

As Terri was discussing what things her son’s university has in place that supports learning disabilities, she mentions that she has guardianship papers for her son, and she can take the papers to the school and take care of his affairs. Terri said,

> *But we have full guardianship, like making decisions. Um, he can't really do that without someone consulting us because he's not aware and over his finances like that. So, we have, that's mandated by the state. So, we went to court and it's a court document, so it's a legal binding contract.*

Terri believes that assuming the role of legal guardianship for her son, despite his legal adult status, is essential for his success. This guardianship serves as a safety measure, allowing Terri and her husband to legally manage any of their son’s affairs. They have determined that this guardianship is a necessary role at this stage of their son's development to prevent anyone from taking advantage of him.

Daniel describes his ever-evolving role for his son. Daniel describes how their parenting approach has evolved from closely monitoring Michael's academic progress to now serving more as mentors and encouragers, allowing Michael to take responsibility for his own work and decisions. When asked how his role has changed from K-12 to postsecondary, Daniel explained that he is no longer giving his son the same level of support as sitting next to him ensuring his homework is done. However, he and his wife will assist with more complex assignments as needed. He sees himself moving into more of a mentor and encourager role.

Ava acknowledges that the previous hovering behavior that she exhibited early on in her son’s postsecondary journey was not something he wanted or enjoyed but felt like if she hovered, she could prevent her son from failing. What she realized was that the overbearing behavior was not causing her son to be successful, it was a source of stress for him. So, she had to let go of control and trust that her son was going to do what he needed to be successful and risk letting him fail. She could not be the overbearing mom any longer. Ava needed to assume a new role that allowed for trust and independence. Ava acknowledges that even if she wanted to communicate with the professors about her son’s academic progress, by law, she did not have access:

> *They don't want that either. They don't want that trying to become independent and figure out who they are. They don't want their mom pressing down on them every hour of the*

> *day. So, there's some things I had to just let go. I couldn't carry over, but I always stayed in touch. One of the things that I appreciate about him is that I get that their generation is the text generation that is them. And it's not like K through 12. You go to the teacher and you talk directly to the teacher. It's completely different. So, I couldn't do that, and I had to trust that he was going to communicate with me, and I could just look in the portal to see grades, and I could say to him, you need to write your professor about this. You need to write your professor about that. I mean, that was the only way I could communicate with the teacher.*

The passing over of responsibility from parent to child is highlighted in the stories of these participants. "The Changing of the Guard" underscores how parents of African American young men with learning disabilities adapt to evolving roles and new constraints on accessing information. They strive to balance providing necessary support for their sons while also allowing them space and freedom to assert their independence. Moreover, they encourage their sons to utilize campus resources, trusting in their ability to manage new responsibilities while pursuing success in higher education.

Theme 3: In the Intersection of Black and Disabled

The theme, “In the Intersection of Black and Disabled,” explores the experience of parenting a Black man and a man with learning disabilities, and the convergence of these two identities. This theme uncovers the emotional and practical realities of parenting, highlighting the intricate dynamics of having a son who embodies two marginalized identities frequently subject to misunderstanding.

Black Man Walking

“Black Man Walking” highlights the perceptions and the experiences of parents who have sons who walk around in Black skin. The parents share the struggles and fears of what it means to try to believe in the goodness of a world that has historically treated Black men poorly. They also share their concerns about how Black men have been brutalized by the police and their fears that their son may be endangered. This section shares the parents' stories of their son being another "Black Man Walking" and being subject to receive undue brutality or mistaken identity.

All six parent participants shared some version of fear or worry when it came to having a son that walks around in Black skin. Daniel speaks about his worries about his son leaving the house. He discusses his fear that his son will be at the wrong place at the wrong time. With giving his son more independence coupled with the concerns he has with his son moving into various spaces inhabiting Black skin:

> *But to have a black son in America is a challenge. Sometimes you worry and they go out at night. Certainly, police brutality is an issue. Just black male skin is considered dangerous in America in some corners. Doesn't mean everywhere, but we know you can meet the wrong person or be in the wrong situation with someone who harbors either fear or racist belief towards black boys and we know that can go the wrong way.*

Terri expresses concerns about racial discrimination and police brutality affecting her son, leading to difficult conversations and the need for vigilance. She also speaks about the need to protect her son. She recalls an incident where her son was going through vacant homes with a White friend and the concern she expressed to her son because of previous incidents where Black men have been killed for running through their neighborhood and going through vacant homes. She understands that the world is not safe for her child. A choice that seems innocent to her son could lead to great consequence:

> *you feel a sense of you are guarded because you're like, I have to protect, protect my child. And when, um, the situation happened with, um, what's his name? Um, Ahad, um,*

> *Mar, uh, yes, Marbury. Um, at our old house, Dillion had a good friend, um, who's Caucasian, and they would ride bikes and they would go over to the other neighborhood and they were building homes. And during that time, there were some vacant homes, and they went into the vacant home. And, you know, we had to have a conversation with him. I was like, you can't do that.*

Eve discusses the perception that society has of Black men and in her interview, she expressed how that perception brings her worry because some of society is looking at her son as a threat. Where she understands her son is not a threat, she understands that what society perceives Black men to be is what the reality is. She knows that her son is kind and respectful. However, when he is walking down the street, she knows that him being a Black man, he is perceived as" scary":

> *For me, with all that is going on around with how black males are, how society perceive who they are for certain people, being a black male means that you have no good, they see you and because you're black, you are scared. They're scared, they don't know what to expect and all of that stuff.*

Kerry goes into detail about a few of her sons' Black male friends that have died due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She worries about her son and his perception that he is more street smart than he is and that he could be involved in something tragic:

> *Oh God, yes. When Jacob, who thinks he knows the world's not safe, he's experienced a lot with seeing gun violence, honestly, with Deon, Jason and a couple of his other friends that he, that's a lot of his grief, A lot of his grief is that I'm a black man, and what if I decide to do something, stuff like this happens to me. Or what if I'm not that Deon was an innocent bystander, but what if I'm an innocent bystander and somebody gets shot? What*

> *if I am on the streets and unrecognized me every time Jacob steps off of that campus? I'm very concerned. I'm very concerned that he has a little bit of street smart than him, but not as much as he thinks.*

Black and Disabled Oh My!

"Black and Disabled Oh My!" delves into the journey of parents navigating alongside their son who rejects the disability label, aiming instead to blend in and be perceived as "normal." The parents grapple with their son's quest for normalcy, discussing their thoughts and feelings while serving as his primary support system. Furthermore, the parents contemplate the many ways in which their son's race and disability influence his life, discussing their role in assisting him in navigating these realities.

Ava shares the struggle of how her son perceived the label of learning disabled. He believed that people look down on people with learning disabilities and he wanted nothing to do with “those people”:

> *Because in his mind, he's thinking, oh, people look bad on those people. People look down on those people. He didn't want to be associated with that.*

Ava tried her best to help her son understand that having a learning disability was nothing to be ashamed of. She struggled to help him understand that the only issue is when the person does not get the help they need. Ava does not understand where her son gets this mindset from, because she works in an environment that supports children with learning differences and she has always talked positively about people who are not “normal.”

Additionally, Ava discussed her son’s desire to be “normal” that her son wanted to hide his disability because he did not want anyone to know and if he could continue to hide, he would continue to be “normal” in his mind and appear “normal” to others. Ava tried to push her son to go to disabilities services and encourage him to get the support he needed. However, Ava understood that for her son having to tell anyone that he needed help would out him and put him as an outlier. Her son was adamantly against anything that made him stand out.

Kerry discusses her son not going to get services initially even though they had gone to the disabilities support office, and he signed the consent form for them to be able to give her information. Although Jacob was fully aware of the services that were available, he did not use them. Kerry believes that Jacob was ashamed to use services, because it gave him a perception of weakness and her son the identity of the "strong Black man" has been instilled in him since birth. *Can I have the outline in advance? Can I get the notes in advance? Whatever it is. But when I tell you, they have so much, and you might already know so much technical assistance, support that there's no way no one should not graduate if they have accommodations, if they really ask for what they need. So, I think Jacob had a lot of shame initially around requesting it.*

Lisa expresses both pride in Michael's character and fear for his safety in a society where he may face prejudice based on his appearance and behavior. Lisa discusses the stigma surrounding ADHD and how it intersects with racial stereotypes, noting that people often make assumptions about Michael's behavior without understanding his unique characteristics and needs. She feels that it is less about him alone being their Black son, as it is coupled with what she refers to as his uniqueness:

> *And I would say it's probably less about him being our African American or black son. It's coupled with his uniqueness. So not only are you going to be seen and some assumptions are going to be made about you by the way you look, they may not even give time to understand who you are on the inside.*

When having to choose one identity that stands out more, Lisa feels like the qualities that are a result of his disability are the ones that make him stand out more and potentially put him the most at risk than it is his race. She is concerned that how he talks, acts, and dresses, and that others will make assumptions that just are not true. She fears that because of how he interacts with others that may immediately put him in danger and that they will make a judgement before even getting to know who he is.

Lisa goes on to discuss more about the intersection of her son being a Black boy and his disability which has him show up differently in the world than what is considered “normal.” She reflects on how the world may misunderstand him, because he does not show up in spaces the way society may expect him to based solely on his outer appearance:

> *And most people will misunderstand a black boy with this uniqueness about him and sometimes don't even exercise the patience that is needed with that. And then Michael River is socially awkward at the same time, so it takes him a minute to warm up to people. So, he's definitely an introvert, so people don't understand what that packaging looks like. You're a black boy, you're an introvert, you're a pure heart, you have ADHD. All kinds of permutations can come from those attributes.*

Society often imposes specific expectations on Black men regarding their behavior and demeanor. However, when a Black man also has intersecting identities, such as being Black, male, and having a learning disability, he may not conform to these societal norms. Lisa understands that his disability may lead to responses or social interactions that are misunderstood because they do not align with conventional expectations of how a Black man should behave or present himself.

There have been three major themes presented in representing the perceptions and experiences of the parents as they navigate the postsecondary journey alongside of their African American learning disabled son. The themes that were presented were (1) Bubble Wrap Parenting (2) The Changing of the Guard (3) In the Intersection of Black and Disabled. The next section will explore the themes that emerged from the interview data from the students as they reflected on their postsecondary experience.

Student Themes

Theme 1: Right in the Middle of the Dichotomy

“Right in the Middle of the Dichotomy” explores the intricate circumstances faced by African American men with learning disabilities as they navigate higher education. It explores the parallel realities that these men confront when it comes to their self-perception. While they typically align their identity with "normalcy," entering the postsecondary realm requires a reevaluation of this identity to access support services for their learning disabilities. Despite their reluctance to identify with the label "disabled," it's within this realm that crucial support for their needs is found. Thus, they are confronted with the challenge of reconciling their self-image with the necessity of embracing this identity to self-identify to receive the assistance they require.

Additionally, the theme encompasses the students negotiating the balance between independence and dependance. On one hand, there is a drive to establish autonomy, make decisions independently, and shoulder accountability for their actions. On the other, there is still a need for support and guidance especially when dealing with the challenges associated with their learning disability.

This theme underscores the tension between opposing forces. African American men with learning disabilities find themselves tangled "right in the middle of this dichotomy.” This section examines these phenomena by exploring normalcy vs. disability and support vs. independence, shedding light on the notion of being on this juxtaposition.

Normalcy vs. Disability

While culture has already assigned labels to Black men such as endangered, dangerous, and lazy. The label of disabled is not one more that they are willing to attach to themselves. This section sheds light on the students' journey as they contend with the complexities of reconciling their identity. On one hand, they aspire to blend in seamlessly with their peers, yet they are required to acknowledge and self-identify with a disability, setting them apart. However, failing to embrace this identification could deprive them of necessary support and lead to potential setbacks. Striving for success in postsecondary education requires them to align with a label that may not fully resonate with their self-perception. Consequently, they find themselves caught in the tug-of-war between striving for "normalcy" and acknowledging their "disability."

All four men in the study knew about Disabilities Services and had a good idea of what services were available. All four participants have used the services before, however only two of the participants were actively using the services offered.

Corey's interview reveals insights into his experiences with education, particularly concerning his struggles with ADHD and academic challenges. He discusses challenges with traditional lecture-style classes, difficulty with homework completion, and stress management issues. Corey reflects on his academic journey, including his reluctance to seek help:

> *My mom was like, you can have extended test time, you can get pulled to different classrooms then now cuz I work in a high school in the EC department, I saw, I understand the IEPs and getting pulled for testing and this, that, and the third. But at the time I didn't wanna be different cuz I went to schools that were predominantly white. So, I*

> *was kind of an introvert so I didn't wanna feel excluded from my peers. So, I didn't want extra testing time, I didn't wanna be pulled out and feel different. So, I was never the person who wanted to be, I didn't wanna be different, so I didn't want the extra help So the teachers, the professors didn't really know because I wasn't asking for it.*

Corey is aware of what services are available to him. Using any of the available services would put him outside of the perception of the normal identity that he has tried so hard to uphold. The receiving of services would indicate that somehow, he was less than or incapable. Corey talked earlier in the interview about attending a predominantly white K-12 environment and he always felt like he stood out, so it was his goal to blend in with his peers especially when he got to the postsecondary level, because he felt like he had a fresh start.

Michael River has only used accommodations once. He discovered that they were available to him when he first visited the university. He inquired about them when he visited. So, Michael River knew before he even enrolled at arts and design school that there were accommodations that he could access:

> *actually, so when we first came to arts and design school, one of our counselors was talking to me and my mom and I actually asked, does arts and design school have accommodation? And he said, yeah, they do. So that's how I discovered that ..., they were welcoming and they were nice. And yeah, they definitely did help me the first time I used them.*

Michael River decided to utilize accommodations when he needed extended time on a test. He recalls using a separate set of computers to accommodate his extended time and acknowledges that they were beneficial, as he ended up achieving a good grade on the test. However, the experience of being segregated to take the test was not something he particularly wished to repeat. Instead, Michael opted to invest time in understanding how his university operates, believing that this alone would equip him to navigate successfully. Thus far, he reports performing well and currently feels no urgency to seek further assistance.

Corey was the one participant who openly admitted that he hates asking for help. Corey reflects on the fact that he is aware of what services and resources are available to him. He knows that he can get tutors to assist him and people to proofread his work. He has used them a little bit, however, he discontinued use at his first university, and he is currently not using the services at his online university:

> *Yes, Ok. I knew about them, but again, that's me going to ask for help and I hate doing it. There were resources, there were people who would proofread your papers or there was a multitude of tutors for different classes and I used them a little bit, but I didn't use them as much as I should have.*

Corey acknowledges that his encounter with using the resources wasn't negative; Corey just disliked how using services was a threat to his identity. Seeking assistance places Corey outside the norm of his peer group, and although the tutoring experience itself wasn't detrimental, it poses a threat to his self-identity. Despite recognizing the potential benefits of assistance, Corey adamantly refuses to utilize them like he knew he should, fearing it may compromise his self-perception, regardless of its effectiveness.

Adam's experience stands out from that of the other participants. Adam discusses his classes and workload, expressing his enjoyment of interacting with fellow students. He also recounts his experience of receiving support for his studies, which includes accommodations such as extended time for assignments and tests. Following his disclosure of the accommodations he uses; Adam is asked about how he arranges for them. He explains that he typically visits the disabilities office to have his needs addressed, but he can also request services via email. This indicates Adam's comfort with the staff and his confidence in asking for assistance. Furthermore, he mentions that he can access extended time for quizzes and tests when facing a heavy workload. From the interview with Adam, it is evident that he feels extremely comfortable seeking the help he needs, as he openly discusses visiting the disabilities office without hesitation.

Disability services can serve as a valuable resource for individuals with learning disabilities. However, the requirement of self-disclosure to access support underscores the perception that the individual stands out as different. While some found beneficial support through these services, not all chose to continue using them. Despite the assistance provided, utilizing these services can set these students apart from the "normal" student population. Many of these individuals have overcome significant challenges and barriers to graduate high school and pursue postsecondary education. The primary goal for the men to blend was to blend in with their peers and being required to self-identify supersedes this goal.

Support vs. Independence

The students are navigating to a new increasingly demanding academic environment, where they must explore unfamiliar and novel ways to receive support. They are confronted with balancing the necessity for support with the desire to embrace adulthood. This section explores the dichotomy between the need for support versus the need for independence.

Students spend time formally in class with professors as they guide them through various academic pursuits. Professors can be a great resource and source of support when it comes to providing accommodations for students, but they also can be a hindrance if they are not knowledgeable of what accommodations are available or are not a safe place that the student feels like they can come to for assistance. When the participants were asked about professors as a form of support all the participants could talk about at least one professor that they found as a supportive person in their academic experience. While Dillion did speak on one poor experience with his English professor, all the other participants had neutral or supportive interactions with professors.

When Corey was asked about the professors at his university, he spoke positively of them and said that they would try to help if asked.

> *The professors at X University were really nice most of them at least. But they would at least try to help you out or try to figure out things that would help.*

Corey has always been extremely reluctant to ask for assistance; he would try to figure it out on his own. He felt that receiving support was a sign of weakness and pointed to he could not handle being a student in higher education. Corey has decided that he would go to his professor for help with an assignment without disclosing his learning disability. This was a way to try to get help while still preserving his independence. While the professors were trying to help Corey, they did not have all the information to understand what his struggles entailed.

Corey goes on to discuss that he had one professor that he found to be welcoming and supportive that happened to also be his advisor. He talked about being able to talk to her because she had a personal relationship with him outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, Corey did not have any other professors or support on campus that he felt he could go to despite previously saying positive things concerning the professor on campus. Corey asserted his independence by deciding not to disclose his learning disability. However, it was this independent decision that led him to not receive adequate support.

Michael River discussed a positive relationship with his anthropology professor. He discusses having multiple conversations and working collaboratively on assignments with the professor:

> *I think I would say my favorite professor was definitely from the winter quarter, from this year he taught anthropology and we talked to each other a lot. He was a really nice man and he loved all the assignments that we would work on together. So, I would say I got along with him the most. And when it comes to the other professors, I remember getting along with them fine, but I didn't talk with them enough to remember how our relationship was.*

In this situation, Michael River has achieved a balance between receiving support and maintaining independence. He fostered a positive rapport with the professor beyond the classroom setting. Taking the initiative, Michael met with the professor and worked on certain assignments outside of class, further nurturing their supportive connection. Despite not disclosing his learning disability, Michael managed to discover a valuable resource tailored to his learning needs through his interactions with the professor.

Dillion has mixed experiences concerning his interactions and how supportive his professors have been towards him and to what extent they have been a resource. He discusses a not supportive relationship that he has with his English professor:

> *It's been a little rough with my professors because my English professor, I don't think we really have a good relationship ... Well, we were supposed to have class, English class at three, but she canceled the class. She has a meeting in Atlanta, so I'm like, all right, that's fine. Because I have some time to do more of my essay that I have to do later today, which I'm glad I could do it because sometimes it's like she has problems with me. And then at the same time, she's cool with me, but I don't know what her problem is.*

Dillion is confused by the relationship that he has with this professor. He talked earlier in the interview about the professor yelling at him concerning the way that he formatted an essay. He said that he did it this way because that is a tool he uses to stay organized when he writes. Dillion struggles to get support for what he needs from this professor, however he tries to manage the relationship on his own by expressing to the professor why he set up the essay the way that he did. However, Dillion confesses that he remains unsure of how to navigate this relationship.

The role of family holds great significance in the Black community, historically, and to the current day. African American men with learning disabilities often face obstacles to higher education. The young men that make it to this level have strong family support and this support has been one of the leading factors in their current day success.

When the researcher was talking with Michael River about his postsecondary journey, he exuded so much confidence about his experience. The researcher asked what has contributed to your confidence and your overall positive outlook. Michael River discussed that he does struggle a little with confidence, however, what gives him the ability to project such a positive attitude he attributes it to having loving friends and family:

> *Well, when it comes to, even though I am secure about myself, I sometimes do have trouble with confidence. Occasionally I'm not always confident, but I guess it's because I'm surrounded by loving family. And I think I'm just happy to be back in Atlanta after being in Charlotte for 10 years, from 2011 to 2021. But I feel like it would just be mostly just having loving friends and family.*

Michael River is on a quest to be a confident adult and find his place in the world. The support of his family gives him assurance; however, he knows that it is his responsibility to move in the world on his own eventually. Michael River then goes on to discuss his desire to move onto campus:

> *But I do want to try to move in this time to get the college experience and also just to start living more independently. However, I do still enjoy the comfort of living with my parents.*

This quote highlights the internal conflict regarding the desire to embrace adulthood by moving on campus. The on-campus experience symbolizes freedom and independence, yet the safe and comfortable environment created by his parents at home leaves him uncertain about pursuing on-campus living. Moving to campus would entail a new level of navigation and a potential loss of the same level of support provided by living in his parents' home.

Corey explains that his mother is the biggest source of support for him. He emphasizes that his mom wants the best for him, and she has been a strong consistent source of support for him throughout his academic career:

> *My mother loves me to death and she always wants the best for me. So even my, she's my grade struggling. She used to get mad at me but now she understands and she's more like I'm here to help and it can help in any way that I can just have to let her know what I need. My mother she's been my rock. She's always been there to support me and I making her, I feeling like she's proud of me for something. So, every time I got a good grade or pass the test, I'd tell her because it made me feel good that she was happy for me.*

Despite Corey's poor choices in not seeking the necessary resources at his university, he continues to rely on his mom for support and encouragement. Corey has independently chosen not to seek help, resulting in declining grades. However, he still seeks affirmation from his mom as he navigates his academic challenges and asserts his independence.

In conclusion, this section sheds light on the intricate dynamic between seeking support and asserting independence in the students' journey through their new academic environment. As they navigate this terrain, they face the challenge of discerning the right balance between leaning on professors and parents for support while striving to carve out their own path toward independence. The exploration of this opposition underscores the complexity of their experiences as they navigate the transition to adulthood within the academic realm.

Theme 2: The Juggling Act

"The Juggling Act" focuses on the quest for balance between building and maintaining friendships, engaging in extracurricular activities, and overcoming academic challenges. It highlights the strategies the students utilize to juggle these different facets of their lives effectively. It discusses the various experiences they have with making friends and maintaining friendships. It also explores the various activities that the men choose to engage in while pursuing their postsecondary education. The section finishes with the highs and the lows of trying to find balance between friendships and activities alongside academic failure and struggle. This section includes two categories (1) friendships and extracurricular activities and (2) the struggle is real.

Friendships and Extracurricular Activities

Friendships and extracurricular activities play integral roles in shaping the postsecondary experience. These friendships foster a sense of genuine connection and community, offering accountability and camaraderie. Complementing friendships are the extracurricular pursuits chosen by the men, providing opportunities to alleviate stress and forge additional connections within the community. This section delves into the joy experienced by these young men through the connections made on campus, which have served as support systems in various capacities.

All participants in the study discussed the significance of forming friendships on campus. While only one currently resided on campus, they all found the process of making friendships to be both seamless and enriching. Furthermore, on-campus activities served as additional avenues for connection. Three participants actively engaged in extracurricular activities, with two of them participating in competitive sports, which proved to be a significant source of connection and community.

Dillion recounts the rapid formation of friendships upon his arrival on campus. Participating in a summer bridge program facilitated instant connections with his peers. He emphasizes that these friendships have cultivated a sense of community, characterized by mutual support, reciprocal actions, and shared accountability among its members:

> *My friendships, I didn't think it was going to get this quick, but my friendships are real, real good so far because my suitemates, we for a while because we were in the summer program called Boost, and so we've had that connection and then some people that are not in my suite, and then the other dorms, we had that connection because they do a lot for me and well, we do a lot for each other, but they mostly do stuff for me. And I just think the relationship with my friends are real good. They look out for me. They even get on my case when my grades are not looking that good, so they try to push me to do better.*

Dillion relies on his friendships and takes immense pride in the companions he has found. These friendships offer him a sense of connection, a shared bond, and a valuable support system. He expresses enthusiasm about his friends' genuine concern for his well-being and feels reassured knowing they are there for him in times of need. He has established a safe place amongst his group of friends that allows him to be his authentic self. Additionally, they hold him accountable, encouraging him to stay focused on his goals even when he may feel discouraged or lose sight of them.

Due to Dillion having created strong friendships and community at his university, it was the natural next step to venture into an activity that involved social connectedness. Dillion was eager to throw his hat into the ring for freshmen class president. Although he did not win the presidency, he is hopeful for his sophomore year, however he continues to be active in student government as another form of social connectedness. Dillion recounts his experience,

> *Well, right when I got on campus, I started to meet a lot of people, and then going on a few weeks, I knew a lot of people on campus, and so I was like, I should just run for freshman president because a lot of people know me. And then if I run, I could get even more people to know me and maybe even the chancellor to run.*

Dillion getting involved in student government has given him an intense sense of community on campus and confidence in making friendships. He is already looking forward to next year and how his growing friendships will support him. This activity has provided a sense of belonging that he may otherwise not have found without it.

Adam discussed how he enjoyed hanging out with the students at his school and he gets to engage socially with his peers and this interaction provides him social connectedness and community belonging. He also talks about being able to study with his friends at school. The friends that he has made are in his major and Adam asserts he has found a community of friends that are like minded individuals, and he has found comfort in being able to study and hang out with people with similar interests.

The Struggle is Real

“The Struggle is Real” details the academic struggles the young men have encountered during their time in postsecondary education. It highlights the hardships of failing grades and withdrawing from classes. The section reveals the overall struggle with figuring out how to manage this new stage of life with a learning disability. Three of the four participants told stories of some sort of academic struggle. Michael River, who is currently getting all A's and B's, did not speak at all about academic struggle. However, all the other participants mentioned the struggle.

Dillion talks about trying to keep his grades up and playing on the basketball team. He struggled with trying to balance the two. Basketball stole his focus away from his studies and his grades were falling. He admits the struggle and wants to do his best in school; he works to get his grades back up:

> *Well, it was with my grades. It's with my grades. And then also I just felt like some people were getting it under my skin because with my grades I played, I got on the team and stuff and I started really focusing more on basketball instead of my grades. And my grades were falling down and now I'm trying to bring them up a lot, which they're up there. I just want them up even more because I just want to do the best I can be.*

Dillion loves playing on the basketball team at school. It is a dream come true for him. He never thought that he would have the opportunity. Being on the basketball team for Dillion represents social acceptance and gives him a certain level of social clout. He struggles to balance the need for social acceptance with the pressures of keeping up his grades. Dillion is engaged with the extra academic support that the university offers him. However, both sports and the extra support both require Dillion's time and attention. Dillion struggles to figure out how to do both.

Adam was questioned about his most challenging experience, to which he shared his struggle with Trigonometry. Despite his efforts, he found it difficult to grasp the concepts, which only became more challenging over time. Recognizing his limitations, Adam made the self-aware decision to withdraw from the class rather than risk receiving a failing grade by continuing. Despite utilizing available supports, he was unable to fully comprehend the subject matter, leading to his withdrawal from the course.

Corey recounts his failing grades and the fact that his parents had set a standard for his grades because they were paying for his education. He talks about not having any problems doing his work in high school and the panic that began to set in because he was not able to understand what to do to get himself back on track. Corey struggled to make the connection between the contribution of his mom's organizational system and her stringent accountability to his K-12 high success. Without this support, he is confused by the extent of his struggle and why it has become so prominent:

> *My grades were slipping and I wasn't paying for it. My parents had the 529 plan set up for me and they were like, we're not gonna pay for your bad grades. What's delved into a whole different other issue because I now know why my grades are slipping. But in the moment, I was like, What do you mean? I was just kind of frantic, not really knowing what was going on. I was just doing the same thing I was in high school but I wasn't understanding why … It's just a combination of not knowing how my brain operates.*

Corey also talked about his struggle with homework completion and time management. He was distracted by social connections and his desire to wrestle while trying to maintain his grades. He talked about the stress that he experienced when he had to face the reality that he may have to transfer and leave his sports team and friends:

> *Opening the homework, I would do it once I opened it, but it was having that urge to open it, I wouldn't wanna open it. So, grades started slipping because I couldn't pay*

> *attention to class and then I didn't wanna do homework. So that was starting to decline then. So especially when my parents were like, you have to get your grades up or we're gonna pull you out. It was real big. That was probably one of the bigger issues with me because I was struggling to get my grades up and then cuz really wanted to wrestle and I didn't wanna leave my friends I didn't wanna switch schools, I didn't wanna transfer cause all my friends were here. So I was like, but then I wasn't really doing anything to get my grades up because I didn't know how, I didn't ask for help. So that's where I kind of faulted. And then me and my dad had a whole falling out because of it because he blamed wrestling. But wrestling was one of the things that kept me sane if you will. It kept me from falling off the edge or gonna do something stupid because it's what I wanted to do and I had to do good for it.*

Corey found success on his wrestling team. He found social connections and a sense of accomplishment. Wrestling helped him find a sense of happiness and fulfilment that was not found in the classroom. However, Corey grappled with the challenge of balancing his academic performance with his commitment to wrestling. Wrestling was a double edge sword for him. It kept him grounded but it also took some of the attention off his studies and Corey needed the extra focus on his studies due to his learning challenges.

"The Struggle is Real" delves into the challenges faced by young men in their postsecondary education journey, highlighting issues such as failing grades, withdrawing from classes, and grappling with managing their academic goals. The narratives of these students underscore the complicated challenges encountered by students in navigating postsecondary education with learning disabilities. While the young men struggle, they never give up their goal of postsecondary completion.

Cross Theme Analysis Parent and Student

This section will compare the parents' and students' interview data to gain insight into their experiences and perceptions of the postsecondary journey of African American men with learning disabilities. During the cross case analysis, the following main themes emerged (1) All parent participants had a strong expectation for their son to go to four-year postsecondary education by their spoken or unspoken example and the son took this expectation and made it a personal goal; (2) Both the parents and students are adjusting to the new system of obtaining resources for the son's learning disability; (3) both the parent and student are striving to achieve this idea of "normalcy"; (4) The Black male identity is more salient for the parents than it is for the student.

Higher Education Goals

All the parents, either by example or explicit goal setting for their son put them on a trajectory toward higher education. Even after realizing that the sons' learning disability may be a barrier to higher education, most of the parents did not revisit or revise the goal. College was an expectation for the son from an early age. All the parents in the study had some higher education and modeled for their sons' professional careers that required higher education. Many parents started talking about college as the next step early in the lives of their children. Then they also put them in schools that were college preparatory. Additionally, they took them to visit schools and regularly discussed what college or university they would attend. Furthermore, older siblings had attended postsecondary education. So, it was the natural progression for the students to desire to go to higher education, because that is what they knew from an early age.

Kerry talks about how the goal for higher education was spoken and unspoken in their household:

> *Jacob has, since he was a baby, always went to John (Jacob's Father) job. And his father was always the boss. He's going to conferences with his father. His father is speaking, his father's on panels. His father's doing this. His father is leading groups. His father is doing that, right? So, I'm sure he's like, this man has to have these expectations for me. You know what I'm saying? You are my seed. You are. And I think that when we go into the people that we associate with, the things that we do, the places that we've been, it's a spoken expectation that you got to be great. But I think in kids' minds, even at 22, they don't really understand our definition of greatness. And we feel like greatness looks like what the world says is great, but greatness can be defined in a whole bunch of different ways. And by the time you recognize it as parents and damage is already done.*

Kerry acknowledges that her son had always lived in the shadow of his father's accomplishments. His father holds a doctorate degree and has always taken his son with him on his professional engagements. Consequently, they inadvertently modeled for him that following the same path to academic success as his father, culminating in college graduation, was the sole route to achievement. Reflecting on her son's struggles in completing postsecondary education, Kerry realizes that they may have erred in not presenting him with alternative notions of success. She recognizes the significant role they played in shaping their son's singular goal of attaining higher education.

Daniel declared that going to college was an expectation. All his children have attended college and just because Michael River had a learning disability, this was not going to prevent him from going or completing. They expected that it may take him six or seven years to complete a bachelor's degree, however, Daniel and his wife are in full support of his goal, and they are going to give him as much support as he needs for as long as it takes for him to complete his postsecondary education.

The students were clear that they wanted to go to higher education. None of the young men seemed as though they were forced into going. Despite any struggle or the multiple universities, they had attended, they believed deeply that higher education completion was what was necessary to be successful. Michael River talks about how he always wanted to go to college. He investigated going to the HBCU that his big brother was at but decided to go to a different school because they did not have the major he wanted. His brother was the example to follow for Michael River. His parents and all his siblings had gone to college and in his mind, this was the only option for him to pursue.

Similarly, Adam chooses to attend a two-year community college with plans to transfer to a four-year university for Civil Engineering. Adam was very clear in his interview that these were his plans. Adam's parents were open to supporting him in whatever he wanted to do after high school, but Adam had a goal of higher education. Eve Adam's mother said,

> *we are open to everything but I think this boy is, he wants to go to college. And then every school too that we make sure he went to was college preparatory so that we weren't looking at him not being able to, because we let him know from an early age that look, it's whatever you want. We are there for you. We'll support you if this is what you want, go for it.*

Students, with the support of their parents, remained steadfast in postsecondary education completion no matter what the challenges that were experienced in K-12. This was never seen as a reason not to attend higher education. The goals of the parents have been fuel for the sons even when academic struggle and attendance at multiple institutions of higher education has plagued their stories. What they both agree on is that higher education is something that they both value and are willing to do what it takes to get to completion no matter how long it takes to complete and what support level is necessary.

Self-Disclosure the Key to Access

Self-disclosure of a disability is crucial for accessing resources and accommodations in an academic setting. Therefore, it is imperative that students practice self-advocacy. Navigating the disclosure of a disability and accessing assistance in higher education presents a significant responsibility for students, particularly when considering legal and privacy constraints. Even though a student may legally be an adult, laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) restrict parents' access to their child's educational records without explicit consent. As a result, the decision to disclose a disability rest solely with the student. This responsibility causes the parents great alarm and is often a significant challenge for the student. This sudden shift in responsibility is discussed by both parents and students in this section.

Kerry expresses her disdain for this new system that her son is now a part of in his quest for higher education. She feels that the system is a bit ridiculous, and you can glean this from the language that she uses in her quote:

> *So let me talk about WJ, because what they did was, what I don't like about the school systems in college is they keep trying to tell these 18 year olds that they're adults and that they could advocate for themself. And your parent doesn't have to be responsible, and the kids don't know what to ask for. So those was the first things that counselor said to him, your parents don't have to be involved. This is your decision. You're a young adult, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But of course, thank God we had the relationship with Jacob that he's like, oh yeah, no, no, talk to my parents, blah, blah, blah, blah, help me out. But we did that. So, we had to get all those consent signed that so that we could check in on*

> *Jacob, make sure he had accommodations, things like that. When they give you the accommodations, it's the student's responsibility to go to the teachers and show them what it is and ask them, can they have these things?*

The parents overall express the uneasiness of the stark requirement that their son is thrust into this situation that he must advocate on his own. They find it disconcerting that any information must be obtained directly from the student or necessitates signed consent. All student participants have consented to grant their parents access to information, recognizing the significant role their parents play in supporting them. The students acknowledge how large of a role their parents have played. The students do not always want to have to single themselves out. Although they are grateful for the additional assistance, the prospect of standing out and appearing different sometimes leads them to decline help. The students acknowledge that while they are legally adults, they still find comfort in knowing their parents are there to support them. One student is thinking about moving to campus but is in no rush because he enjoys the comforts of home. The parents acknowledge that their children are legally adults but still need moderate levels of support and the sons still want them involved in helping them navigate some of the accommodations at school evidenced by the consent forms that they have signed to give their parents access. The sons desire a degree of freedom but still rely on parental assistance. Both parents and students agree that parental help is necessary and welcomed.

Seeking Normalcy

When the sons were born, neither of the parents expected to have a child with a learning disability. Many parents experienced a range of emotions, from blame to sadness, but they all shared a commitment to taking action to address their child's unique learning needs. Parents want to help the son either uphold normalcy or allow them to be normal. This commitment led parents to create a "normal" childhood for their sons, reassuring them that they are no different from their peers and can achieve anything. As part of this normal expectation, higher education attainment was encouraged. Some parents explicitly used the term "normal" to convey this expectation. Lisa said,

> *But we both always wanted him to go to college again, that's the normal part. Okay, high school, then college, but we also expected it to take a little bit longer and we were okay with that.*

Lisa referenced normality when referencing college aspirations. There was a mindset in her household, and I believe in the other parents' households that normalcy in adulthood revolved around some sort of postsecondary completion. These values of "normal" were then passed onto the students. The concept of normality came up frequently in the interviews. The parents said things like he was a "normal" kid. He does not want to be "singled out." They discussed their sons having "normal" challenges, as to affirm his normality as opposed to being abnormal. It was evident that the parents spent time affirming this over the course of their child's life. Corey would tell his mom Ava that he wanted to be "normal" regularly as it related to his learning disability. She spent countless hours affirming his normality and trying to reframe the conversation. Corey resisted services specifically, because he wanted to be normal, and to identify as disabled set him on the perimeter of normalcy. The parents continued to fight for a "normal" life for their sons and the sons continued to assert their normal identity.

Racism

When the parents were asked about raising a Black man in America, they expressed extreme concern for their son's wellbeing and how they would be treated fairly in this world. The parents reflected on previous incidents of Black men being assaulted and killed for merely existing while black. They also reflected on incidents where their white counterparts would be shown and given grace and their son would be immediately put at risk. They also spoke of teaching their children how to respond to police if ever stopped. However, this was a stark difference when the men were asked to talk about their experience of being a Black man in America. The men did not feel the same fear or concern that the parents felt. They barely even gave pause to the issue and did not speak of any concerns in great length. Only one of the participants could recall an incident where he experienced a microaggression on campus. He talked about dressing a certain way for Halloween in a white tank top and overall Jeans with his hat turned backward and one of his White friends said that he looked “threatening.” This comment made him feel uncomfortable and he immediately recognized this as microaggression. When asked about the racial climate on his campus, Michael River commented,

> *That's interesting because I've been hearing some controversy about arts and design saying that they discriminate against black people and there are a lot of black people that attend arts and design here in Atlanta, especially since Atlanta is a black mecca. But I haven't seen any racial discrimination, even though people talk about it a lot at arts and design through articles and stuff, but I haven't seen it for myself.*

While there is an acknowledgement of racial discrimination it is not something that he has experienced personally.

Summary and Transition

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings from the data collected from six parent participants and four student participants in this phenomenological multi-case study. The purpose of this phenomenological multi case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. The themes presented give a snapshot of the participants' lived experiences. The quotes and the narration of the quotes share an in depth insight into the participant's story. By exploring the lived experience from multiple stakeholders, the following three themes emerged from the parent participants (1) Bubble Wrap Parenting (2) The Changing of the Guard (3) In the Intersection of Black and Disabled and the following two themes emerged from the son participants (1) In the Middle of the Dichotomy (2) The Juggling Act. The cross case analysis presented the following four themes (1) Higher Education Goals (2) Self-Disclosure the Key to Access (3) Seeking Normalcy (4) Racism. The last section, Chapter 5, presents a discussion of the findings in connection to the pre-existing literature. The chapter concludes with implications and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological multi case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. The following research questions served as the core focal points of this investigation:

Parent

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

2) What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

3) What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Student

1) What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution?

2) What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?

Discussion of Findings

The following section provides an in-depth discussion of the research findings in relationship to the research questions. Providing connections to the existing literature will offer the reader an idea of what existing literature aligns with the research results. It will also provide the reader with clarity on where my results diverge from the literature, providing findings that offer new insights and forge questions for further study. The three parent themes, two student themes, and four cross case themes emerged were a product of the narrative that were expressed and will be the foundation for the findings. Parent themes (1) Bubble Wrap Parenting (2) The Changing of the Guard (3) In the Intersection of Black and Disabled and student themes;(1) In the Middle of the Dichotomy (2) and The Juggling Act. The cross-case analysis presented the following four themes (1) Higher Education Goals (2) Self-Disclosure the Key to Access (3) Seeking Normalcy and (4) Racism.

Table 5

Research Questions and Emergent Themes

Research Questions: Parents	**Answers**	**Emergent Themes**
1. What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?	• Fear of Stigma and Judgement • Counterbalance learning disability • Avoidance of Negative Emotions • Control	**Bubble Wrap Parenting** Sub theme: Non-Disclosure of Diagnosis Sub theme: Over Protection
	• Polarizing Feelings • Outsider Status • Distrust • Stress	**The Changing of the Guard** Sub theme: Proud and Concerned Sub theme: Help Maybe
	• Expectation Alignment with Sons Abilities • Adhering to Social Norms	**Cross Theme**: **Higher Education Goals**
	• Fear of Son's Academic Failure • Helplessness	**Cross Theme: Self-Disclosure the Key to Access**
	• Coping Mechanism	**Cross Theme: Seeking Normalcy**

Table 5 (continued)

Research Questions and Emergent Themes

Research Questions: Parents	**Answers**	**Emergent Themes**
2. What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?	• Academic Assistant • Detective • Encourager • Safety Net • Creating Counternarratives to disability	**The Changing of the Guard** Sub theme: Parental Roles
3. What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?	• Fear	**In the Intersection of Black and Disabled** Sub theme: Black Man Walking Sub theme: Black and Disabled Oh My! **Cross Theme: Racism**
	• Threats to Son’s Psychological Well Being • Threat to sons’ ability to socialize safely and obstacle to receiving equitable treatment in academic spaces.	
Research Questions: Students	**Answers**	**Emergent Themes**
1. What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution?	• Reject Labeling • Reliance on Family for Multiple Areas of Support	**In The Middle of the Dichotomy** Sub theme: Normalcy vs. Disability Sub theme: Support vs. Independence
	• Joy • Belonging • Community • Overwhelmed	**The Juggling Act** Sub theme: Friends and Activities

Table 5 (continued)

Research Questions and Emergent Themes

	- Academically Insecure	Sub theme: The Struggle is Real
	- Feeling Social Pressure - Living up to Parents Expectations	**Cross Theme**: **Higher Education Goals**
	- Uncomfortable	**Cross Theme: Self-Disclosure the Key to Access**
2. What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?	- Establishing An Academic Identity apart from Services	**In The Middle of the Dichotomy** Sub theme: Normalcy vs. Disability Sub theme: Support vs. Independence
	- Accountability - Support - Confidence - Belonging	**The Juggling Act** Sub theme: Friends and Activities

Research Question 1: Parent - What are the psychosocial experiences of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Parents have served as resilient advocates and collaborative partners in their sons' educational journeys. However, upon reaching postsecondary institutions, parents experienced negative emotions, need for control, and apprehension. The study's findings inform various psychosocial facets of this transition. This section explores the social and emotional terrain traversed by parents as they struggle with this evolving role, exploring themes such as "Bubble

Wrap Parenting," which encapsulates fear of stigma, avoidance of negative emotions, and control. "The Changing of the Guard" highlights parents' navigation of their newfound outsider status, the conflicting emotions surrounding their sons' postsecondary education, stress, and feelings of mistrust. "Higher Education Goals" sheds light on parents' expectations regarding their sons' pursuit of higher education. "Self-Disclosure: The Key to Access" underscores parents' apprehensions regarding their sons' academic capabilities and the requirement to disclose their disability to receive services. Lastly, "Seeking Normalcy" examines the inclination to embrace normalcy as a coping mechanism.

Bubble Wrap Parenting

Post-secondary education ushered in a wave of negative emotions for the parent participants of this study. Orr and Goodman (2010) noted that the most powerful theme in their research was the lasting impact of having a learning disability pertaining to the student participants’ emotions, self-esteem, and identity but this study found that parents suffered a lasting impact as well. Several parents had encountered stigmatization of their sons during their K-12 schooling. This experience instilled a sense of apprehension in the parents. Fearing that their sons might undergo similar stigmatization in the postsecondary environment, the parents attempted to shield them with Bubble Wrap Parenting. Despite lacking evidence to support their fears, they continued to harbor concerns and remained vigilant, fearing the possibility of their son facing stigma, the parents chose to not disclose their son’s diagnosis. Disability status has been used as weapon to discriminate, particularly against Black boys in education (Baynton, 2001; Proffitt, 2020) and the parents were aware of how having a disability could cause their son to be viewed as less capable.

Control was another psychosocial experience of the parents which materialized as non-disclosure. Non-disclosure surfaces at Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) microsystem level. By managing the flow of information within their microsystem, parents established a sense of security for both themself and their son. While the presence of their son's learning disability was beyond their control, parents exercise of agency over what information was shared within their family and community circles afforded them a greater sense of security and belief, as they were shielding their children from harm. Ultimately, non-disclosure served as a sanctuary for both the parent and the son to navigate the complexities associated with disability. This notion of sanctuary was not present in the extant literature.

Over Protection

Parents tried to counteract the effects of their son’s learning disability by putting in additional protective systems that would insulate their son against failure in the postsecondary environment. The parents were cognizant that the postsecondary setting would introduce new academic hurdles for their son. Yet, their support for him in tackling these challenges exceeded the typical parental involvement expected during the college years. The parents were aware they needed to grant the sons greater independence; however, they were not sure how to move from this extreme level of protection and their son achieve postsecondary academic success. Miller et al. (2018) asserts it becomes a delicate balancing act for parents as they navigate the fine line between respecting their young adult's self-determination and independence, while also serving as an advocate.

The parents' overprotective behavior shielded their son from failure and spared them from witnessing what one participant described as their son’s "spiral out of control." This overprotective dynamic between parent and son can be clarified with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of the microsystem, which explains the interpersonal interactions within a given context. This dynamic interaction exemplifies the interplay between parental overprotectiveness and the son's method of navigating within this protective boundary.

The Changing of the Guard

An additional psychosocial dynamic unveiled in the research findings revolves around the emotional tug-of-war experienced by parents. They undergo a complex array of emotions. The parents experienced distrust of their son’s ability to handle his new academic responsibility. Along with a great deal of emotional stress, the parents are working to give their son independence and support him simultaneously. Stepping back and relinquishing control, as described by Miller et al. (2018), entails an emotional toll termed "letting go." However, this process is not only essential for fostering the development of skills necessary for independent living but also contributes to the student's overall quality of life. While the parents are overjoyed that their sons are adhering to the social norm of attending higher learning, the parents remain uncertain if the academic rigor is the right fit for their son. Miller et al. (2018) findings suggest that when parents of students with disabilities can step back and allow their children to take ownership of their lives, it leads to positive outcomes.

The literature is silent as it relates to parents of learning-disabled men beyond the transition period to higher education. Studies like Trainor (2005) discuss transition planning and the role the parent plays in helping with the transition. However, beyond studies like this, the literature does not speak to the ongoing dynamic relationship between parent and student. However, looking at the Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem helps to clarify the parents’ experience. The parents feel the emotional tension of the various accomplishments that their son has made that reflect positively on their family values and aspirations. However, within this microsystem, they encounter uneasiness about their new status that puts them on the peripheral of their sons' educational aspirations. Thus, parents find themselves in a delicate balancing act, compelled to step back and allow their son to take the lead, all while harboring concerns about the challenges he may encounter.

Help Maybe

The findings underscore the importance of parents having to trust that their son will seek out the appropriate support at the postsecondary level, thereby necessitating a reliance on the university system. Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the university disability services operate at the exosystem level because they exist outside of the immediate interactions of the parent and student (microsystem) but still have a significant impact on the students support and resources, within the university setting. The parents are challenged by the changing responsibility of support, now shifting from their domain to the university. This transition causes stress for the parents. According to Wagner et al. (2005), approximately two-thirds of postsecondary students with disabilities receive no accommodations from their schools, largely due to a lack of awareness of their disabilities by the institutions. Moreover, about half of postsecondary students with disabilities do not identify themselves as having a disability, while another 7% acknowledge it but have not disclosed it to their schools. This statistic is troubling for parents of learning-disabled sons, because there is a probability that their son will not seek out the help that is required.

Cawthon and Cole (2010) found that students had very little knowledge about their disability and the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) created in their K-12 education to support their learning needs. Once on campus, it becomes solely the responsibility of the sons to seek assistance; this marks the first time they must advocate for themselves. Despite this, parents continue to provide substantial support to their sons, including assistance with complex assignments and writing. However, their involvement is often done in isolation. The university intentionally excludes parents from the support equation, expecting the sons to take the lead. Consequently, parents find themselves uncertain and out of sync with the university's approach. All information is relayed through their sons, leaving parents feeling like outsiders, despite being one of the largest stakeholders in their sons' postsecondary education completion. This highlights the importance of reevaluating the role of parents in the support process and fostering greater collaboration between parents and universities.

Parent: Higher Education Goals

The results of the study emphasize how parental expectations significantly shape students' attitudes and behaviors regarding postsecondary education. Additionally, the pressure for parents to conform to social norms played a crucial role in motivating them to instill the expectation of higher education in their sons. As emphasized by Wagner et al. (2005), parental expectations not only influence students' academic endeavors but also impact the support and resources parents provide to facilitate their children's learning journey. Every parent included in the study had experience with higher education and regarded it highly for their son. This expectation significantly influenced how their sons perceive and approach attending institutions of higher education.

However, when faced with challenges such as learning disabilities, the expectation of postsecondary attendance may clash with the reality of their children's struggles. In such instances, parents must reassess whether their expectations align with their children's abilities and needs, avoiding the risk of unrealistic goals. Despite experiencing academic challenges, the narrative of needing a higher education to achieve success persists within the family unit.

Families play a crucial role in helping individuals discern societal values and personal aspirations. Tolliver et al. (2021) underscore the importance of parental guidance in shaping adolescents' educational pursuits. The significant influence exerted by parents instilled students with the confidence to pursue higher education despite potential hurdles. Within the family framework, a favorable perspective on attaining higher education was instilled, fostering a positive attitude toward postsecondary completion among the students.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, students were impacted by various factors, notably parental expectations as well as the cultural norm at the microsystem and macrosystems level. These expectations, rooted in parents' own experiences with higher education, outlined their vision for their sons' post-schooling possibilities, as well as the social norms and values of the community that the young men were embedded. The values of the community evolved around postsecondary education completion as an indicator of status and social acceptance.

Parent: Self-Disclosure the Key to Access

Parents encountered a profound sense of helplessness and fear as they wrestled with the new system of self-disclosure that now surrounded their sons’ educational endeavors. Within this system, the provision of services hinged upon their sons' willingness to reveal their disability status (Wagner et al., 2005). This predicament posed a significant challenge for some sons, who struggled with the decision to disclose their disability in exchange for necessary assistance. This struggle resonates within existing literature suggesting that African American students with learning disabilities often confront difficulties in requesting accommodations upon entering college, typically waiting until they encounter academic obstacles or setbacks (Banks & Gibson, 2016; Denhart, 2008; Wagner et al., 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptualization of the exosystem illuminates this scenario, characterizing it as a systematic barrier that individuals must overcome to access essential services. This structural barrier poses a dual challenge, impacting both students and parents alike. Although parents recognize the potential benefits that services could offer their children, their hands are effectively tied by legal constraints that limit their access to request services on their son's behalf. The key to accessing these services is through self-disclosure, a process that Denhart (2008) elaborates on, indicating that students with invisible disabilities, like learning disabilities, may experience heightened reluctance or apprehension towards such disclosure.

Parent: Seeking Normalcy

Research findings indicate that the son aspires to lead a life perceived as "normal," and the parents actively support this aspiration as a coping mechanism to shield their sons from being labeled disabled which often accompanies stigmatization. The son's desire to embrace a conventional identity aligns with the environment created by the parents, who reinforce the notion of striving for normality. Parents invest time in reassuring their sons of their normalcy and endeavor to persuade them that they are indeed "normal." This is aligned with Banks & Hughes, (2013) findings that family members consistently shared stories that conveyed the message that success was achievable despite facing external constraints and limitations. The parents helped the sons create coping mechanism that avoided negative feelings that may surround their learning disability to cope with these feelings.

Although the parents recognize their son's unique attributes, behaviors, and challenges that may diverge from societal norms, they consistently reinforce his identity as normal. When discussing their son's accomplishments and various activities, parents portray them as ordinary. This pursuit of normalcy, embraced by both the son and the parents, has persisted since the time of diagnosis. Individuals with learning disabilities, particularly African American men, often strive to assimilate with their peers and reject the disability label (Banks, 2017). The parents appear cognizant of their son's desire to fit in, a sentiment shared by many African American men with learning disabilities. For African Americans, labeling can lead to exclusion and reinforce the notion that they do not conform to the "normalcy" of the dominant culture, portraying them as defective or deficient (Gallagher et al., 2014). The parents upheld the standard of “normal” for their sons to avoid exclusion and any appearance of the idea of their son being defective.

Research Question 2: Parent - What are the primary roles of parents of African American young men with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

The Changing of The Guard

The parents of these young men have adeptly maneuvered through the complexities of the K-12 education system tirelessly seeking resources, advocating for support, selecting appropriate schools, implementing organizational structures within their household, and undertaking numerous other responsibilities aimed at facilitating their child's graduation and progression to postsecondary education. Initially, the parents assumed various roles to ensure their son's successful navigation through K-12, but now, as their son ventures towards independence, these roles are undergoing a transition. This section will uncover these new parental roles through the theme “Changing of the Guard.”

Parental Roles: Putting In Work

The study findings indicate that parents are experiencing a heightened level of involvement and effort in supporting their postsecondary students compared to their engagement during the K-12 phase. Previously, parents enjoyed unrestricted access to information within the

K-12 system, parents had a more active role and greater access to information, representing a more supportive microsystem Bronfenbrenner (1979). Whereas FERPA laws now impose limitations, necessitating the student's consent for access. FERPA is what Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to as an exosystem. In this context, the imposition of FERPA laws represents an exosystemic factor that impacts the information flow and support mechanisms available to parents. The regulatory framework surrounding access to student information directly affects the dynamics within the microsystem and, consequently, the support parents can provide. Even with consent, access remains restricted. This shift places parents in a position where they struggle to obtain essential information, hindering their ability to effectively fulfill their supportive roles. Consequently, parents contend with the challenges of obtaining necessary information and are thus unable to seamlessly support their children. This frustration often leads to parents working overtime to navigate this new environment and support their children adequately.

Asking the Right Questions

As a response to feeling excluded from the information loop by the university, parents assumed a new role reminiscent of that of a detective. They utilized questioning strategies to gather additional insight into the support their son might require, while also being attentive to cues indicating where they, as parents, might need to intervene and offer a safety net for their sons. This adjustment was necessary for parents on two fronts: firstly, to remain informed about their sons' academic and social activities while simultaneously allowing their sons to exercise independence and for the parents to build trust in their sons' decision-making ability. The act of questioning facilitated a mutual exchange, fostering accountability in the sons while also offering parents insight into areas where their sons might be encountering challenges.

While the literature is silent regarding this phenomenon, it can be viewed in the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. This dynamic can be understood within the framework of the microsystem, where interactions between the individual (the son) and their immediate environment (the family) influence how various supports are employed for their son. The parents' questioning behavior represents a form of interaction within this microsystem, impacting the parents' understanding of what the son needs and, as a result, what support the son receives from the parent effecting their academic experience. son's experiences and outcomes.

Moreover, the questioning functioned as a gentle reminder system, ensuring that parents remained aware of specific assignments or appointments, such as counselor visits. Ultimately, this questioning dynamic allowed parents to gather information, alleviate concerns, and assess whether their sons were facing difficulties requiring intervention.

Support on Standby

While taking on the role of detectives to gather information, parents did so with the intent of being equipped to help whenever their sons encountered difficulties. The study unveiled that parents lived on the edge, perpetually vigilant and prepared to intervene as necessary. The postsecondary education phase for these young men was characterized by constant evolution, with their needs continuously changing. Consequently, parents found themselves in an ongoing state of evaluating their son's requirements and determining the most suitable course of action for his success (Miller et al., 2018).

One parent, Daniel, observed that his role had shifted towards that of an encourager and mentor. Conversely, Eve perceived her role as that of a vigilant observer, monitoring her son's situation for signs of trouble and ready to provide aid as needed. Having become accustomed to offering a high level of support, parents remained on standby, demonstrating adaptability and resilience, ready to fulfill any role their son might require. Tolliver (2021) discovered that a supportive family structure conducive to academic success greatly benefits these men.

In the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, this dynamic can be interpreted as the interplay between the microsystem (the immediate family environment) and the mesosystem (the interactions between the various microsystems). The supportive family structure identified by Tolliver (2021) serves as a crucial component of the microsystem, influencing the experiences and outcomes of African American men with learning disabilities. Additionally, the constant assessment and adaptation by parents align with the mesosystem, where the interactions between the family and the postsecondary education environment impact the individual's development and success.

Research Question 3: Parent - What do parents perceive about the intersecting identities of disability, race, and gender on the social and academic experiences of their African American young man with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Considering the complexities inherent in race, gender, and disability, these intersecting identities present a myriad of intricate issues, challenges, and concerns (Annamma et al., 2013). This section examines how parents perceive these intersecting identities influencing their sons' experiences at the postsecondary level. It addresses the research question through an examination of the following themes: "In the Intersection of Black and Disabled" and "Racism."

In the Intersection of Black and Disabled

Black Man Walking

The research findings revealed that parents expressed deep-rooted concerns regarding the safety and well-being of their Black male children. They dealt with the harsh reality that societal biases and systemic racism posed significant threats to their sons' lives and futures. DisCrit acknowledges this reality, exposing the historical and legal facets of race and disability and how they have been used collectively and individually throughout history to deny civil rights and access to groups of people (Annamma et al., 2013). These parents fear that their sons will encounter barriers or face unjust treatment due to the enduring legacy of how Black men have been historically treated in the United States. They worry that this legacy of exclusion will impede their sons' progress into adulthood, given the systemic way race is perceived and utilized to marginalize individuals. They were cognizant that activities deemed innocent by their sons' White peers could potentially lead to severe consequences, including incarceration or even death for their sons, solely because he walks around in black skin.

This highlights what Bronfenbrenner (1979) termed as the macrosystem which encompasses the broader cultural and societal context. Systemic racism is deeply ingrained within the macrosystem, perpetuating inequalities and disparities. Parents of Black male learning-disabled students must contend with societal norms that perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination, further complicating their efforts to support their children's educational journey.

Black and Disabled Oh My!

The research revealed that parents expressed apprehension regarding the intersectionality of their sons' identities. They harbored overarching concerns that their sons' distinctive behaviors and obstacles might cause them to be perceived differently in society than the typical expectations associated with being a Black man. This aligns with the second tenet of DisCrit, which acknowledges the impossibility of segregating a person into distinct, separate identities. Instead, it emphasizes that all aspects of an individual's identity interact and interconnect to shape their unique sense of self (Annamma et al., 2013).

Racism

The parents of African American young men expressed worry regarding the potential for their sons to encounter racism in their postsecondary environment. Conversely, their sons did not share these concerns. They had minimal encounters with racism, which did not play a significant role in their daily postsecondary experiences. Only one participant could recall experiencing racism from another student. None of the participants believed that their race posed obstacles in their interactions with professors or accessing services. This finding contradicts Harper (2006), who suggests that African American men may face a hostile and unwelcoming atmosphere at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) while pursuing degree completion. However, the young men in this study who attended PWIs reported feeling welcomed and never mentioned feeling marginalized due to their race.

Bridges' (2010) asserts that African American men at PWIs encounter racism, both overt and covert, daily, impacting their psychological well-being. This aligns with the notion of the microsystem within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework, which encompasses immediate environments where individuals directly interact and experience socialization. However, the findings of the study diverge from this expectation. Despite the prevailing belief that racism would negatively affect the young men's psychological well-being, they expressed no sense of stigma related to their race. This discrepancy may suggest the importance of considering other factors within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework, such as the macrosystem (broader cultural beliefs and values), in understanding the nuanced experiences of African American men with learning disabilities.

Research Question 1: Student - What are the psychosocial experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution?

What is clear is there are multiple social and emotional factors that profoundly impact the postsecondary experience of these young men. Upon embarking on postsecondary education, students encountered joy, a sense of belonging, and community, alongside academic insecurity, feelings of being overwhelmed, dependence on family, and a disposition toward rejecting the disability label. Based on findings, the following themes provide the framework to answer this question: “In the Middle of the Dichotomy” highlights factors influencing their identity and their quest for support while maintaining autonomy. "The Juggling Act" illuminates how students balance friendships, extracurriculars, and academic priorities. "Higher Education Goals" underscores the significance of postsecondary education for these individuals. As a final point, “Self-Disclosure the Key to Access” explores the obstacles young men encounter in accessing appropriate supports.

In the Middle of the Dichotomy

Normalcy vs. Disability

One of the major psychosocial experiences in which Black learning disabled men had that impact their time in postsecondary education was the quest to be viewed as “normal.” Blending in was the goal these young men were trying to achieve. Standing out caused emotional distress and an unwelcomed attention that Black men are looking to avoid. Specifically, the literature reveals that ability is a societal construct and being labeled puts a person outside of the western norm (Annamma et al., 2013). More pronounced for African American men who have historically been ostracized not only in the education system, but in society at large. Stereotypes of Black men as uneducated, threatening, lazy, disinterested, and dangerous continue to permeate schools and society (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Wright& Ford, 2019). Schools are often a source of trauma for Black boys, with or without disability labels (Proffitt, 2020). These Black men are carrying a legacy of trauma inflicted upon them through their educational experiences. Normal signifies the absence of any deficiency. Demonstrating normalcy for these young men suggests possessing the intelligence necessary to attend university alongside peers. Researchers agree that students with learning disabilities do not want to be viewed as intellectually inferior and desire to blend in with peers (Gallagher et al., 2014 & Petersen, 2009). Sitting outside of what is “normal” is an overall threat to these young men’s self-esteem and their sense of belonging at the university.

The men chose different routes to establish normalcy. There was a tendency to hide and get lost in the crowd. Banks, (2014) discussed this idea of hiding. However, the act of concealing ultimately placed some of the young men in a position where they couldn't bounce back from academic setbacks. Remaining silent for too long meant that by the time they sought assistance, the problem was out of control. African American students with learning disabilities often struggle with asking for accommodations when entering college until they experience academic difficulty or failure (Fries-Brett, & Turner, 2001; Banks, 2014; Banks & Gibson, 2016).

The young men believing in the concept of “normal” allowed them to create a narrative that was comfortable and a counternarrative to what they saw as a stigma that was attached to a label of disabled. This is aligned with Banks and Hughes (2013) assertion, that a disabilities label can be frustrating for students and cause them to have to make a choice between ongoing silence, deliberate acts of resistance, and or the creation of a story that rejects inferiority perpetuated by the dominant culture.

While the label of disabled can cause trauma to a young man’s self-esteem the need for support beyond the label is imperative. Just as the young men had to balance their desire for normal. There was a necessity to balance the need for support on their quest for independence.

The findings indicate that the young men showed reluctance in seeking and utilizing services due to the perception that disclosing disabilities support would mark them as different. Denhart’s (2008) study found that students with invisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities, had an overwhelming reluctance to request or use accommodations. While the men found support in the use of the services not all of them continued use. The use of these services, no matter how helpful, puts these students outside of the “normal” student population. This finding is aligned with tenant three of “DisCrit which emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 19).

These young men do not want to be categorized as any different than their peers. Having to identify as learning disabled set them outside of the western cultural “norm” of being able bodied. Interestingly, neither group of students, whether they used the services or not, identified themselves as "disabled," echoing the rejection of labels often imposed by dominant culture (Gallagher et al., 2014). This refusal to label themselves aligns with a broader trend among African American men and reflects a desire to avoid being cast as defective or deficient (McGregor et al., 2016).

While culture has already ascribed some labels to Black men such as endangered, dangerous, and lazy. My findings suggest that the label of disabled is not one more that they are willing to attach to themselves. When the researcher asked the participant how they described themselves as far as identity, all participants described themselves as Black men and some other descriptors. However, none of them identified as disabled. According to (Liasidou, 2014) there are psychological effects that occur when labeled according to your disability, thus setting a person on the perimeter of the acceptable western cultural norm. The findings in the study point to the young men’s rejection of disabilities services not wanting to be looked at as “othered.” This aligns with the perspective of Banks and Hughes (2013), who argue that disability represents a sequence of complex interactions that require a choice of ongoing silence, deliberate acts of resistance, or the creation of a story that rejects inferiority perpetuated by the dominant culture. These young men had deliberately decided to resist support and reject the narrative of what they consider as “inferiority” by using disabilities services.

Support vs. Independence

The research revealed that although students expressed a desire for independence, they heavily relied on their parents for support and cherished the comfort provided by their assistance. Despite their excitement about postsecondary education and their attempts to assert independence, they admitted to depending significantly on their parents. The literature emphasizes the vital role of parents and families in supporting the education of students of color (Trainor, 2005; Banks & Gibson, 2016). Parents played a crucial role in the daily lives of the students during their postsecondary journey, offering extensive support ranging from homework assistance, emotional support, and financial guidance. The students embraced this support and felt a sense of security from the resources and advice provided by their parents. None of the students were eager to exclude their parents from their support network; although one student expressed intentions to move out, he wanted to ensure readiness for this step and found comfort in knowing that his parents were not pressuring him. Brown et al. (2012) recommended continued family involvement, including parents, throughout the college experience, as it contributes to student success. All students in the study acknowledged the importance of ongoing parental support in helping them succeed in the postsecondary environment, recognizing it as a critical factor in their educational journey.

The Juggling Act

Friends and Activities

The desire for social connectedness through friendships and activities was a major psychosocial factor in the students' experience. DaDeppo's (2009) study identified academic and social belonging as predictors of persistence among college students with disabilities. For these young men, establishing friendships and social connections was essential for thriving in the postsecondary environment. These friendships instilled a sense of security and joy, as they provided support beyond their nuclear family. Additionally having peers without learning disabilities as friends served as a reference point for what was "normal" in higher education.

Mamiseishvili & Koch (2011) assert that social connectedness was shown to be one of the essential factors that affects a student's growth and increases the probability that they would persist. Participating in activities provided these students with a sense of acceptance among their peers, offering a platform for achieving success and bolstering their emotional well-being, particularly in the face of academic challenges. Banks and Gibson (2016) noted that genuine connections to campus culture among students of color with disabilities can enhance retention rates. For instance, one student's involvement in student government, including running for freshman class president, fostered a deep connection to the campus community, ensuring ongoing engagement throughout his college years. Activities such as student government and organized sports provided these students with a supportive peer group, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion within the broader campus community.

The Struggle is Real

During the students' time at the university, they encountered substantial academic challenges. For many, these struggles began upon their entry into postsecondary education. Their academic difficulties presented in various ways, such as failing grades and incomplete assignments, which often led to the decision to withdraw from classes or, in more severe cases, drop out of the university entirely. Denhart (2008) highlighted the increased effort required by students with learning disabilities compared to their non-learning-disabled peers.

The participants in the study used terms like "overwhelmed" and "hard" to describe their experiences. The young men faced a greater workload and increased level of responsibility, necessitating enhanced planning and organizational skills, which many struggled to develop. The findings from the study partially aligns with McGregor et al.'s (2016), which indicated that students with learning disabilities encounter increased challenges with assignments, face more barriers—both academic and non-academic—to success, and generally report lower satisfaction with their university experience compared to their non-disabled peers.

Interestingly, although they exhibited signs of struggle, they remained remarkably satisfied with their overall postsecondary environment. They told stories about positive academic and social experiences at their institutions and all the students viewed their time in higher education positively. These young men were enthusiastic about reaching this significant milestone and were resolute in their determination to overcome any obstacles.

Higher Education Obtainment Goals

The goal to pursue higher education is a noble goal and the desire for this goal can come from a variety of social and emotional factors. What was clear in the research was the goals of the young men’s parents had for them relating to higher education became one of the driving social factors for enrolling in postsecondary education. The study aligns with Harper (2012), which contends that a non-negotiable expectation from parents of college attendance is a strong catalyst to get the student to start their postsecondary journey. There was an example set by the parents that modeled that postsecondary education was the right thing to do and the natural next step to be successful. This indoctrination had become the only postschool goal that the sons set their sight on.

Meeting parental expectations and following in their footsteps became an implicit social pressure for these young men. Banks & Gibson (2016) highlight the significant role of family members in shaping the decision-making process for African American students, particularly those with disabilities. Prior to enrolling, many of these young men were already familiar with the college environment through attendance at college preparatory schools and campus tours. Harper (2012) found that being exposed to the collegiate environment before college attendance significantly shaped college aspirations. The exposure to higher education placed a deep seeded commitment to postsecondary education attendance. Social acceptance involved postsecondary education, and the young men yearned for the approval of their parents and the community. Despite the young men encountering various obstacles, these students remained determined in their decision to pursue higher education.

Student: Self-Disclosure the Key to Access

The young men participating in the study expressed unease regarding the requirement of revealing their disability status to the university, which dissuaded some from accessing available services. Unlike their experiences in the K-12 setting, where assistance was provided without the need for self-identification, transitioning to postsecondary education posed a new obstacle. Many individuals with learning disabilities hesitated to seek accommodations due to the attached stigma, leading them to refrain from registering or utilizing disability services (Banks, 2014; Denhart, 2008). The association with stigma was the primary cause of discomfort for the young men. Being compelled to disclose a diagnosis created cognitive dissonance for this group, as they were encouraged to keep private within their family structure.

Cawthon and Cole (2010) emphasize that as students move from high school to college, they are tasked with the responsibility of requesting accommodations and advocating for themselves to ensure they receive appropriate support for their disability. The young men lacked a plan for advocating for their specific needs, aligning with Cawthon and Cole's (2010) findings that students with learning disabilities often feel unprepared to navigate the process of identifying, securing, and advocating for services. The young men did not fully grasp which services they needed to address the challenges they faced. Although they understood that services were available, they struggled to connect the specific challenges posed by their learning disabilities with the available services provided. Their focus seemed to be on avoiding the need to disclose to professors or university personnel to maintain the status quo. The young men did not see the need to consider self-advocacy in relation to their disability. Essentially, some of them adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" approach, preferring to remain unnoticed in hopes of being unaffected.

Research Question 2: Student - What are the experiences of African American men with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution regarding social and academic supports?

The study’s findings inform the various social and academic experiences of these young men. The young men received support, gained confidence, felt a sense of belonging, and were held accountable by their social networks. Additionally, the young men felt the necessity to establish an academic identity separate from disabilities services regarding their academic support. The findings of this study revealed that these support systems emerged in two main themes: "In the Middle of the Dichotomy," illustrating the conflicting pressures these men face when navigating available supports and seeking assistance, and "The Juggling Act," highlighting the challenges of managing multiple priorities.

In the Middle of the Dichotomy

Normalcy vs. Disability

What the research points to is that disabilities support is a great resource for this population. The young men felt like it was a welcoming place and a place that they knew would meet their needs. They also understood accommodations and how to access it and viewed it as an area of support. However, for some participants in the study, the stigma of the disability label kept them from accessing the services on a consistent basis. The researcher rarely used the word disability in the interview and the participants did not use the word as it related to their identity. As in Denhart, (2008) where the participants in their study stressed, they had a healthy cognitive difference rather than a disability. This was like the participants in this study.

Colleges and universities are required by law to provide reasonable accommodations to students who self-disclose their disability and request support services (Newman & Madus, 2014). Disabilities services can provide varying degrees of support depending on what the needs of the individual are. Nevertheless, it is up to the student to request these accommodations and advocate for what they need (Cawthon and Cole, 2010). However, what was common amongst both groups that used the services or did not was that neither group used the word “disability.” The students refused to label themselves. This was in line with Gallagher et al., (2014), asserts labeling for the African American is often a way to be excluded and highlight that the person does not fit into the "normalcy" of the dominant culture and create an image of them being defective or deficient. The young men rejected labels whether they found support in disabilities services or not.

An additional finding was that the role of disabilities counselors is pivotal; a strong connection with the counselor facilitates continued use of services. The disabilities counselor, not just the services themselves, played a significant role in facilitating access to support. Those young men who consistently utilized the services tended to develop a strong rapport with the counselor, viewing them as a reliable point of contact. They felt at ease walking into the office or reaching out via email. This personal connection with the counselor added a human touch to the services, as exemplified in Dillion's interview. According to Mull et al (2001), disabilities support staff are critical to the success of support programs.

Support vs. Independence

Professors play a pivotal role in the success and well-being of students with learning disabilities, serving as a significant layer of support for the research participants. The regular contact that these young men had with their professors allowed them to establish positive relationships, which they found helpful and boosted their self-esteem. Banks & Gibson (2016) discovered when a faculty member creates an environment where students feel a sense of belonging it leads to a boost in students' confidence and self-esteem. The students felt comfortable reaching out to their professors after class for support, creating a level of care that enabled them to seek assistance when needed. This welcoming environment fostered by professors encouraged informal conversations after class and facilitated connections that led to additional assistance for the young men. Importantly, these positive interactions prior to encountering issues were instrumental in making the participants feel at ease approaching their professors when problems arose. Contrary to the findings of Cawthon and Cole (2010), which suggested that interactions between faculty and students with learning disabilities were primarily formal exchanges around accommodations, all four student participants discussed some informal interactions with their professors.

Conversely, poor interactions with professors left students feeling confused and discouraged, as they looked to their professors for positive leadership and support. Denhart's (2009), research revealed that students often felt misjudged by faculty members, which they perceived as a barrier to their success. One participant cited a negative experience with a faculty member that severely impacted his confidence and sense of belonging in the postsecondary environment. The influence that professors wield in their position of power significantly shapes how students with learning disabilities perceive their academic standing in the university community. The pressure to disprove stereotypes and prove that they were granted admittance to the university because of their intellectual capabilities is a well-known burden that African American men face (Harper, 2012).

The phrase "It takes a village to raise a child," or “It takes a village,” originating from an African proverb, is commonly used in the African American community to underscore the importance of communal support for one another's well-being. This concept shifts the focus away from the fiercely independent ethos often emphasized in Western culture and emphasizes the more Afro centric concept of living in harmony with community support systems. My research highlights the vital role of family support networks in the postsecondary experience of African American learning-disabled men in conflict with the western norm of independence.

Most participants in my study cited their nuclear family as the primary source of support. This is aligned with Banks (2014), that found students with learning disabilities formed a network of support which included family. The young men’s family members offered a range of support, including emotional, academic, organizational, spiritual, physical, and mental. Emotional and organizational support were the most prevalent types identified in my findings, with mothers typically assuming the primary support role. While other family members were involved, such as fathers, siblings, aunts, and uncles, mothers tended to be the first point of contact for both good news and emotional support after academic setbacks. Furthermore, the data suggested that parents wielded significant influence over decision-making processes, with the young men frequently seeking their parents' approval. This observation is consistent with the assertion made by Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2007), who found that African American men were greatly influenced by their parents' behaviors and communication styles.

The consistent and robust support provided by families, as indicated in my findings, aligns with the conclusions drawn by Banks and Gibson (2016) as well as Guiffrida (2004), found that family support system outside of the university plays a huge support role for students of color. However, African American men with learning disabilities find themselves entangled in a struggle between the university's insistence on fostering independence from their families and their families' efforts to offer support.

The Juggling Act

Friends and Activities

The students found a strong network of support amongst the friends and activities that they engaged in on campus. They relied on this network for encouragement and accountability, particularly those residing on campus who leaned on their friendships during tough times and to maintain motivation during periods of academic struggle. This finding aligns with Orr and Goodman (2010), who observed that perseverance in the postsecondary environment often stems from supportive relationships that offer encouragement. For these students, their friend network became as vital as their family. Corey, for instance, found happiness in any activity if he was with his friends. Feeling connected in the postsecondary environment emerged as a crucial facilitator of success for this demographic (Orr & Goodman, 2010).

Moreover, these friendships provided an informal, yet significant, source of academic support. The students relied on their friends for group study sessions and assistance in staying academically focused when they veered off course. This informal network fostered an environment where they felt comfortable asking questions, sharing notes, and preparing for exams, forming a solid foundation of academic support.

Many of the friendships formed by the young men stemmed from their involvement in various campus activities such as student government and organized sports. These activities served as both a distraction from the stressors of postsecondary education and a source of motivation to excel academically, ensuring their continued participation in these extracurricular pursuits. Simons (2013) noted that involvement in student organizations significantly contributes to the persistence of African American men in pursuing their degrees, with students more likely to persist as long as they remain connected to such organizations. Overall, friendships and activities played a pivotal role in providing essential support for this population.

Limitations

One limitation observed in my study pertains to the differing levels of rapport established between myself and the students compared to the parents. While I found that sharing my personal narrative at the outset of the interviews facilitated immediate trust-building with the parents, the same level of rapport was not achieved with the students. I believe that this was one factor in the depth of information that was obtained through each of the interviews.

The data gathered from parent participants holds a richer depth compared to that from student participants. On average, parent interviews extended approximately 40 minutes longer than those with students and, in turn, created a data set that was more heavily weighted toward the parent perspective. Furthermore, interviews with students provided less insights, particularly regarding discussions pertaining to their diagnoses and racial experiences. It became apparent that students were less inclined to delve deeply into these specific topics.

During the interviews with students, I was particularly mindful of the sensitive nature of discussing disability identity. Although I had prepared sensitive follow-up questions on this subject, I refrained from asking them out of concern for the participants' comfort levels. Consequently, the data may offer a more comprehensive narrative on disability and accommodations from the parental perspective rather than from the students.

Lastly, the study was designed with the understanding that participants might face communication challenges due to their disabilities. Measures were incorporated into the study methodology to accommodate this potential limitation. Although, one participant presented challenges with processing and speech. The presentation of his disability severely limited his responses to the questions. However, I thought that including his voice in the findings presents a unique opportunity to hear a story that may otherwise have gone untold.

Implications and Recommendations

Beyond the transition to postsecondary education, the voices of parents of learning-disabled men are notably absent in the literature. What is evident, however, is the profound impact that parents' behavior and communication have on African American men, especially concerning academic achievement, accomplishments, and educational aspirations (Kerpelman et al., 2007). Completely removing the high level of support the parents provided for the sons proved to not be helpful for this population. While the college environment promotes this philosophy to facilitate full academic and social integration, it was a hindrance to this demographic. It appears that in the pursuit of fostering self-sufficiency in these young men, colleges and universities are inadvertently severing a crucial support network on which they heavily rely.

While part of the natural process of maturing involves separating from parental authority and forging a self-governing identity (Miller et al., 2018), these young men still derive significant support from their parents. Among the various forms of support mentioned, parental support emerges as the most valuable and relied upon. American cultural values often emphasize independence and separation from parental control as positive and ideal (Trainor, 2002). However, this mindset needs to be reconsidered, especially concerning African American learning-disabled men, who greatly value and require the close support of their families.

Efforts towards culturally responsive services that collaborate with parents to support these young men need to be explored. Implementing a step-down method of support, in conjunction with counselors, could be beneficial. This method would involve gradually phasing out parental support, rather than abruptly discontinuing it, to prevent students from being left to fend for themselves. Unfortunately, the current approach is not effectively serving African American learning-disabled men and is leaving them to struggle unnecessarily.

The findings from the study were clear that the parents of these young men face a large emotional and lift in supporting these young men. They are under a great deal of stress trying to help their students navigate the higher education arena. Often these parents feel alone in trying to support their student. My recommendation is for institutions of higher education to provide resources and support for the parents. Colleges and universities could offer resources to parents of learning-disabled men, equipping them with tools, best practices, and tips on how to support their students effectively. They could provide a page that links parents to available resources such as counseling and support groups. Furthermore, providing a quarterly newsletter to keep parents informed about campus resources and promoting independence could also be beneficial. Virtual workshops could be organized to educate support persons on setting boundaries and offering assistance, with titles similar to "From Bubble Wrap to Independence." While some schools currently offer parent orientation programs, these initiatives could be expanded beyond the transition period. Creating a parent Facebook page could foster community and facilitate communication among parents.

Another implication arises when Black men with learning disabilities receive services that isolate them from their peers; they face a dilemma between preserving their identity and accessing necessary support. The research revealed that this population were willing to forgo services and risk failure versus compromise how they presented to others and how they felt about themselves. To prevent this forced choice, an additional recommendation is to make support services universally available. This would eliminate the stigma around segregated support. Grant all students access to supports such as assistive technology and note taking apps that have traditionally exclusively been for the disabled population. This is a concept referred to as universal design. Universal Design foresees student diversity as standard and strategically plans for this range of differences (Bradshaw, 2020). It involves implementing flexible curriculum that provides options for how information is presented and allows students to choose how they demonstrate their understanding (Bradshaw, 2020). A prevalent misconception suggests that universal design is solely intended for students with disabilities. Initially, universal design was developed to address the needs of students with disabilities; however, researchers soon recognized that barriers in the curriculum were not limited to this population (Bradshaw, 2020). The aim of this recommendation is to mainstream the concept of diversity in learning, moving beyond its association solely with disability.

Finally, research indicates that African American men with learning disabilities who consistently utilize appropriate accommodations are more likely to graduate and less likely to experience prolonged academic difficulties (McGregor et al., 2016; Troiano et al., 2010). Feeling connected is particularly crucial for this demographic (Orr & Goodman, 2010).

The young men in the study that continued using disabilities services highlighted the importance of the personal relationship with their counselor and the welcoming environment in the office. Implications from the study underscore the necessity for disabilities support services to foster an exceedingly welcoming and comfortable environment. This entails creating a warm and inviting atmosphere where students are personally known, and the surroundings project coziness. Comfortable seating and novel snacks can encourage student visits, while ensuring a friendly welcome from the moment students enter until they depart. Additionally, it's vital to ensure that the office location is easily accessible and not hidden. Sufficient staff with manageable caseloads can facilitate personal connections with students, as maintaining a focus on relationships alongside services proves to be pivotal in student utilization. Establishing a robust follow-up system is essential to prevent students from falling through the cracks once they seek services.

Regular staff training on cultural responsiveness and cultivating connections with students are key recommendations. These measures and the previously mentioned recommendation stemming from the study aim to enhance academic success and well-being.
to African American men with learning disabilities.

Conclusion

In response to the call of tenant four of DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) this study highlights and gives privilege to the voices of African American learning-disabled men and their parents a traditionally marginalized population and frequently ignored within research. The purpose of this phenomenological multi-case study was to examine the postsecondary educational experiences of African American men with learning disabilities by exploring the perspectives of both parents and students. This study is one of the first of its kind to bring light to African American men with learning disabilities of the experiences of both the student and the parent at the postsecondary level beyond the transition point into higher education.

To my Black boys who learn differently who will soon venture into the postsecondary arena may the systems that cause difference to be treated instead of embraced be dismantled because of continuing research directed toward people of color. Your voice matters, our voice matters may your pursuits of higher education and your love for learning never be stifled by institutional barriers.

~Selah

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APPENDIX A: PARENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant's Pseudonym: ____________________

Date: ________________

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to participate in this interview. Before we start, I want to tell you a little bit about myself, the research study, and why I am so passionate about this topic. Then I will discuss some general information about the interview, ask you some questions then give you time to ask questions or share anything you feel like we did not cover. This interview will take 60-90 minutes. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Warm-up Question

1. Tell me three words that best describe your son and why?

Background Information

2. Can you tell me about your son's diagnosis?

3. Can you tell me about your son's life before coming to college? (e.g., K-12 school experience, family, k-12 school experiences with special education)

> Lets' start with childhood … **(Family context, community, K-12 school experiences with special education, friendships, teacher and other support, activities, faith)** Can you recall any notable experiences in their K-12 schooling?

4. Tell me about your son's decision to attend college.

Psychosocial Experiences

5. Can you talk about your experience dealing with your son's diagnosis?

6. Can you talk about your experience as a parent with a child with X and what were your expectations for postsecondary education?

7. What do you think the difference is between parenting a child with X diagnosis and a child without X diagnosis?

8. Can you reflect on some positive/negatives of your child having X?

9. Please reflect on your biggest concerns for your son at the postsecondary level?

Support/ Advocacy

10. Can you reflect on as what you see your role in your son's postsecondary education and has that changed any since K-12?

11. How do you support your child in the postsecondary environment?

12. Can you talk about the successes and the obstacles your son has faced at the postsecondary level?

Intersecting Identities & Social Experiences

13. Can you reflect on what does it mean to have a black male child in America?

14. Do you think there are stereotypes about Black men that have X? (If yes, explain)

  a. Do you think those stereotypes impact the way your son thinks about himself?

15. Can you reflect on how you think your son being black and having a diagnosis of X affected his social life on campus?

Intersecting Identities and Academic Experiences

16. Can you reflect on your sons' academic experiences at the postsecondary level?

17. Can you reflect on how race and his diagnosis of X played a role in his academic life at X university/college?

Wrap-up Question

18. Is there anything else that you would like for me to know that was not asked in these questions?

Thank you for your time. Once I complete my initial data analysis, I will contact you to review it to ensure I accurately portray what you are saying. If you know any other parents that fit the criteria for this study, please pass the information to them.

APPENDIX B: STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant's Pseudonym: ____________________

Date: _______________

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to participate in this interview. Before we start, I want to tell you a little bit about myself, the research study, and why I am so passionate about this topic. Then I will discuss some general information about the interview, ask you some questions then give you time to ask questions or share anything you feel like we did not cover. This interview will take 60-90 minutes. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Warm-up Questions

1. What are three words that best describe you?

Background Information

2. Can you tell me about your life before coming to college? (e.g., K-12 school experience, family, k-12 school experiences with special education)
   a. Lets' start with your childhood … (Family context, community, K-12 school experiences with special education, friendships, teacher and other support, activities, faith)
3. Can you tell me about how and why you chose to attend X university?
   a. Who or what influenced the decision?
4. Please tell me how and why you chose your major.

Social/Academic Experiences, Challenges, & Support

5. Tell me about your overall academic experiences on campus? (their best experiences, interactions w professors, their friendships, extracurricular activities, major challenges, major successes)

   a. Tell me about what has been the best experience in college so far?
   b. Can you talk about what are your favorite activities to do and who do you do them with?
   c. Tell me about your relationship/interaction with professors?

6. Tell me about your overall social experiences on campus at (X)?

   a. Now, let's move to your social experiences on campus. Tell me about your social network on campus (classmates, friends, clubs, student orgs)
   b. Who are the people you spend your time with? Why?
   c. Can you tell me about any clubs, activities, or organizations you are involved in?

Challenges and Support

7. Tell me about what challenges you have faced on campus?

   a. Tell me about your hardest times, or most significant challenges you faced. (How did you deal with it? Where did you find support?)
   b. Tell me about your best times, or significant positive experiences you've had.
   c. How do you study when you have a hard test coming up?

8. What do you do when you are stressed? How do you deal with problems/ stressful moments on campus? – stand alone

9. Tell me about your academic and social support system that you use to ensure you meet your goals on campus and beyond? (family, friends, on campus services, accommodations, professors, other)

   a. What places on campus do you think are welcoming and supportive?
   b. What do you do when you have an academic issue? Or Who are the people that you go to when you have an academic issue and why?
   c. Can you tell me about a recent problem you had in college and how did you solve it?
   d. Who is the first person you go to when you have good news/ need advice? Why?
   e. Can you talk about what resources like (career center, academic advising) do you use on campus?

<u>Identity</u>

10. How do you think about the overall racial climate on campus based on your experience?

11. What has been your experiences at XXX with race or racism?

12. To you, what are the most important identities (I am Black, Female, Christian ect.)

   a. Then, how do you describe yourself to others?

13. Can you reflect on being an African American man and what does that mean to you?

   a. Can you reflect on being a Black man with (What they identify with)?

14. How do you think your (What they identify with) gives you additional challenges? If so, how? (ask for a specific incident or experiences if any)

   a. Can you talk about what does it mean to have a (What they identify with) and the effect on how you see yourself?

   b. Do you think your being a man with a (What they identify with) make you become stereotyped?
   c. Do you feel conflict between your identity as a black man and having this (What they identify with) and challenges?

15. Do you think there are stereotypes about Black men?
   a. Do you think there are stereotypes about Black men that have X? (If yes, explain)
   b. Do those stereotypes impact the way you think about yourself??
   c. How do you think your (What they identify with) gives you benefits? If so, how? (ask for a specific incident or experiences if any)

Wrap-up Questions

16. Is there anything else that you would like for me to know that was not asked in these questions?

Thank you for your time. Once I complete my initial data analysis, I will contact you to review it to ensure I accurately portray what you are saying. If you know any other students that fit the criteria for this study, please pass the information to them.