Struggling in Silence: A Qualitative Study of Six African American Male Stutterers in Educational Settings

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Abstract

Stuttering places students at-risk for being stereotyped and experiencing identity difficulties in school. This study hoped to fill a lacuna in the literature on the educational experiences of African American male stutterers. Six African American adult males who stuttered and lived in Washington, DC; Maryland; and/or Virginia participated in this study. Three research questions directed this study: (1) How do speech or language impaired African American males describe their educational experiences?; (2) What coping strategies do African American males who stutter use in educational settings?; and (3) In what ways do educational experiences shape the lives of African American males who stutter? Critical race theory and life history methodologies were used to examine these males' experiences. Findings suggest that stuttering had a significant impact on the lives of the African American males, particularly within educational settings/contexts. Stuttering influenced these males' self-identities and how they navigated their careers.

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Introduction

In previous research, we have argued that multicultural education texts have neglected students who stutter (Hartlep & Ellis, 2013). The purpose of this study is to add to the body of literature on African American adult males who experienced stuttering in educational spaces. This study uses the voices of these men in order to document their experiences and histories. Due to the paucity of research on this subject, the second purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how stuttering impacts the social lives of African American males within educational spaces. The data presented in this qualitative study are important insofar as they provide a window to understanding stutterers' experiences in school. This article also provides future research recommendations for how educators and administrators can create better learning environments for those who struggle in silence due to speech or language impairment (SLI).

Research Questions

1. How do SLI African American males describe their (a) environmental, (b) social, and (c) educational experiences at educational institutions?

2. What coping strategies do African American males who stutter use in educational settings?

3. In what ways do educational experiences shape the lives of African American males who stutter?

Scholarly Significance

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004 defined SLI as a "communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance" [34 CFR §300.8(c)(11)].

IDEA's definition attributes the SLI disability with "adverse effects" to the students' ability to maximize their achievement. The definition suggests that students who are SLI are automatically affected adversely because they have this disability. In other words, "they have lost the game before they begin to play." We argue that being SLI does not, in and of itself, cause adverse effects on a child's educational performance. We contend that the educational environment, social spaces, and a lack

of institutional tolerance all contribute to SLI students' low self-esteem, self-worth, and expectations; thereby adversely affecting students' ability to achieve on the same level as their peers who are not SLI. Researchers such as Alexander, Entwistle, and Horsey (1997) as well as Anderman (2003) suggest that children who find school uninviting are more likely to become academically disengaged. Other studies, such as that conducted by Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, and Willson (2007), contend that academic disengagement has a direct impact on dropout rates, delinquency, and poor adult outcomes.

Much of the existing research on SLI, particularly stuttering, does not focus directly on the African American male population within the discourse. The limited research conducted on SLI students mostly highlighted and promoted therapy and breathing techniques. The academy's lack of knowledge about this population is particularly troubling. This study fills a noticeable gap in educational literature by examining the life histories and educational beliefs of African American males who have a stuttering disability.

Rarely are the personal narratives of African Americans who stutter heard. Our research focuses directly on the life histories of African American males who have a stuttering disability because a better understanding of the lives, realities, feelings, and motivations of this group can help educators, school administrators, and educational programs to provide resources that will positively affect the educational performance of SLI students of color.

Review of Literature

Several researchers suggest that ethnicity, culture, and racial factors affect the life experiences of people who have a stuttering disability (e.g., see Flynt & Morton, 2004; Kent, 2003, among others). Further, disability studies demonstrate that students with disabilities have social experiences at school that are different from students who are not disabled (Israelite, Ower, & Goldstein, 2002; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2006). It is interesting to note that rarely do studies include the combination of race and gender factors on people who stutter (Leigh &Mims, 1975; Van Keulen, Weddington, & DeBose, 1998). This notion of society treating people differently based upon their disability has direct implications for students who stutter within educational settings: SLI students will unwittingly interact with others who may have biases through institutional stereotypes, policies, and practices.

People who stutter are often susceptible to stereotypes, identity issues, and internal and external conflicts. For example, Cochran and Stewart (1998) conducted a qualitative study that consisted of eight adult

participants who stuttered: "Since the cause of stuttering was unknown, these participants were left without a legitimate explanation for its presence in their lives. *Lacking an explanation, they blamed themselves and assumed the guilt of their stuttering*" (p. 255, italics added).

In light of the lack of qualitative studies regarding Black culture and stuttering, one might conclude that stuttering is an issue that is silenced by mainstream society. To this extent, the absence of literature regarding African American men who stutter becomes even more pronounced. The majority of the current literature on Black men—while valuable in offering knowledge on racial, academic achievement, and contemporary issues—fails to highlight the impact of communication disorders such as slurring, stammering, or stuttering. Indeed, most research literature available on stuttering focuses on therapy or speech-language pathology, as we have mentioned previously.

The Educational and Social Experiences of SLI Students

Langevin, Bortnick, Hammer, and Weide (1998) obtained self-reported data from 28 children who stutter and found that 57% were teased/bullied about their stuttering, and 81% self-reported that they were upset about being teased/bullied. Hughs-Jones and Smith (1999) surveyed 267 adults who stutter and found that 83% of the respondents reported being bullied when they were at school. Blood & Blood (2004) obtained data from 53 adolescents who stutter and 53 adolescents who do not stutter and found that 43% of the adolescents who stutter had experienced bullying in the previous week compared with only 11% of adolescents who do not stutter.

In a qualitative study of adolescents who stutter, Hearn, Packman, Onslow, and Quine (2008) found that only 15% of their sample reported being teased or mocked in association with stuttering; however, the data showed that participants experienced being teased more frequently in primary school. Logan, Mullins, and Jones (2008) highlighted that students who stutter are often victims of mean-spirited teasing, name-calling, and demeaning remarks or bullying. Blood and Blood (2007) conducted a study on 18 children who stuttered and 18 children who did not stutter. Sixty-one percent of children who stutter were found to have a significantly higher risk of experiencing bullying behavior compared to 22% of the children who did not stutter.

According to Shames and Rubin (1986), the most common attitudes expressed by stutterers are anxiety, helplessness, victimization, and low self-esteem. Those who stutter are teased by peers (Blood & Blood, 2004, 2007; Hughs-Jones & Smith, 1999; Langevin, Bortnick, Hammer,

& Wiebe, 1998; Mooney & Smith, 1995). The literature suggests that a substantial number of children and adolescents who stutter experience bullying at rates higher than children who do not stutter. "For individuals who stutter, negative reactions from others can be seen during communication interactions beginning even at preschool age, and may persist throughout the child's future school experiences" (Blood, Boyle, Blood, & Nalesnik, 2010).

Victims of bullying in schools can experience academic difficulties including decreased concentration and learning (Sharp & Smith, 1994), increased school failure, and higher school dropout rates (Sharp, 1995). They also showed increased risk for emotional and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Rigby & Slee, 1999), poorer social skills, and lower self-esteem (Fox & Boulton, 2005; Graham & Jovonen, 1998). Anxiety disorders have been reported as more common in children with communication disorders (Beitchman et al., 2001). A preponderance of studies suggest that children and youth with anxiety disorders may be at higher risk for educational underachievement, depression, poorer social support networks and increased family conflicts (Ameringen, Mancini, & Farvolden, 2003; Pine, Cohen, Gurley, Brook, & Ma, 1998; Velting, 2004).

Hauker and Boulton (2000) reported that these negative social and emotional consequences experienced by young victims often persist years after the actual bullying occurs, even into adulthood.

Methodology

This qualitative study examined the educational experiences of African American adult males who stuttered and how traditional educational practices affected their lives. Both critical race theory (CRT) and life history methodologies were used to understand and explain this population's educational, cultural, and social experiences. The following section explains the methodological design that was employed during this study.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative inquiry is a research paradigm that is suited for exploratory studies and is geared towards understanding rather than qualifying phenomena (Fontana & Frey, 1994). In addition, qualitative methods are increasingly being employed to investigate stuttering and its treatment (Cheek, Onslow, & Cream, 2004; Finn & Felsenfeld, 2004; Hay & Stewart, 2006; Huber et al., 2004). The emphasis of the current

study was to explore the lived experiences of African American males who stutter while attending academic institutions. This study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of African American males who stutter from a first-person perspective.

Critical Race Theory

To analyze the data using life history methodology, this study relied on critical race theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework. Yosso (2005) notes that CRT is a research lens that pushes back against deficit views of communities of color, and instead focuses on marginalized populations' cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. CRT draws from the strengths of various disciplines, epistemologies, and research approaches (e.g., see Scheurich & Young, 1997) and is often used to create spaces to tell the counter-stories of the lived experiences of minority groups (such as African American males who stutter). In this study, respondents told about their various experiences in academic institutions, places that had reportedly not been welcoming spaces for people who stutter.

Critical race theory (CRT) was defined by Yosso (2005) as "a framework that can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses" (p. 80). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) contend that critical race theory is a research and theorizing methodology that emphasizes the intransigence of race and racism in society, foregrounding intersections between race, class, and gender. In comparison to conventional research paradigms, CRT is a recent theoretical perspective that is used to delve deeply into understanding the lives, histories, and experiences of people of color. Critical race theorists primarily focus on issues and disparities that are related to class, gender, and race.

Life History

This study also draws upon life history. Cole and Knowles (2001) explain that life history is intended to "advance understanding about the complex interactions between individuals' lives and the institutional and societal context in which they live" (p. 126). They also described life history studies to be "dignified explorations and rendering of human condition, that, in turn, lead to the enhancement of qualities and conditions under which lives are live" (p. 126). Labaree (2006) suggests that another key component of life history is that "it gives voice to the experienced life, particularly for those whose voices may be unheard or deliberately

ignored or suppressed" (p. 123). For instance, Queer Studies researchers use life history methodology to give voice to those whose voices are marginalized, discriminated against, silenced, and not acknowledged in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Thus, life history is useful not only for researching the experiences of African American male stutterers who have been historically silenced within educational institutions, but also giving voice to this marginalized group. Life history methodology was employed in this study in order to capture an in-depth and detailed understanding of the historical contexts in which the participants' experiences and beliefs evolved—fostering deeper, richer, and descriptive analyses of the lives of SLI African American male students and their educational journeys. Life history methodology assisted in gathering information that led me towards an in-depth understanding of how the participants internalized their educational experiences.

Data Collection

Participant interviews. This study used in-depth interviewing as the primary means for data collection. This study borrows from Foster's (1997) research on African American teachers in which she relied on a set of topics to guide her interviews rather than a list of interview questions. This method of interviewing is situated within the life history Methodology and calls for a more conversational, rather than didactic, style of interviewing (Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson, 2001). For this study, the researchers used similar interviewing strategies and situated each interview within a specific theme.

The investigators administered three semi-structured interviews with each participant over three weeks by using live instant messaging chats at various locations, which is commonly known as an active data collection method. Study participants were allowed to participate at whatever location was most convenient for them. The locations of the interviews included restaurants, libraries, coffee shops, and homes.

As previously stated, the six participants were African American males who are speech impaired (see Table 1). Therefore, to increase the ability to communicate effectively with each other, respondents were given opportunities to respond to interview questions via live chat. The interviews were structured to address the research questions. In the consent form, participants were informed that they had the option of responding to interview questions over the Internet. Although every reasonable effort was taken to ensure the effective use of available technology, confidentiality during the actual Internet communication could

not be guaranteed. Before the second and third interviews, manuscripts and notes taken from the previous interviews were reviewed to identify topics that merited further clarification or investigation.

According to the National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (2010), roughly three million Americans stutter across race and genders. However, this study aimed to focus specifically on the experiences of African American adult males who stutter by investigating and illuminating the voices of these individuals who may have been self-silenced and/or silenced by traditional practices within educational institutions. Participants were African American adult males who stuttered, all whom lived in Washington, DC; Maryland; and Virginia.

The site selection process used for locating participants was multitiered; it included contacting members of the National Stuttering Foundation (2012) as well as utilizing Internet resources such as Yahoo, Google, and Facebook to ask people whether they knew of any African American adult males who had a stuttering disability. A snowball-sampling technique was also utilized whereby the investigators asked an already identified participant to recommend another potential participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Due to their speech impairment, study participants were not required to answer questions verbally. Once potential participants were identified, they were asked six questions for the purpose of evaluating their life histories and experiences within educational institutions.

Limiting the sample size provided an opportunity to conduct comprehensive analyses of the data. The study's sample size included six participants. While the small sample size may reflect the lack of African American males who have been diagnosed with a stuttering disability, the life histories of this population can contribute to the fostering of positive academic and social outcomes for persons who have a stuttering disability. This study employed purposeful sampling to identify participants. According to Bogdan and Bilken (2007), "You choose particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory" (p. 73).

Table 1
Backgrounds of Study Participants

Name	*Age*	*Occupation*
QC	29	Nurse
TB	30	Undergraduate Student; Engineer
AB	33	Barber
TG	32	Janitor
GA	30	Data Entry Clerk
CC	32	

Data Analysis

This study used Creswell's process for collecting and analyzing data (Creswell 2009, p. 177).

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis;

2. Read through all the data. Gain a general sense of the information and reflect on the overall meaning;

3. Conduct analysis based on the specific theoretical approach and method (e.g., Narrative, content, grounded theory, discourse, archival, semiotics and phonemic analysis techniques). This often involves coding organizing related segments of data into categories;

4. Generate a description of the setting or people and identify themes from the coding. Search for theme connections;

5. Represent the data within a research report; and

6. Interpret the larger meaning of the data.

This process involves understanding the information recorded in text, image, audio, or video formats. However, for this particular study, the researchers used texted information that was garnered from live instant messaging chats.

The data analysis process began with reading through the interview responses and notes in order to conduct the first round of coding. After that process, interview responses were analyzed across participants to search for important and significant data as well as experiences and perceptions that may be specifically related to race and gender. Then, a second series of coding was conducted to refine codes that were discovered during the initial coding process.

During the process, analytic memos were maintained regarding connecting and understanding these codes. From these codes, patterns were identified both within and across participants. Following the second tier of coding, patterns among codes were identified and situated by matrices and category. Maxwell (2005) notes that "these categories may be derived from prior theory or from inductive developed theory" (p. 97). Both strategies were used to locate categories from patterns within the data, looking particularly for data related to the themes in the study: (1) environmental experiences, (2) social spaces, and (3) educational experiences at educational institutions.

The codes were arranged in a matrix to show how they were categorically assembled. Using qualitative software (NVivo9), the researchers retrieved the quotes that reflect particular codes, selecting codes to analyze data across codes. To answer the first research question, codes and

emerging groups were analyzed regarding connection to environmental, social, and educational significance to the participants. The intent was to develop a deeper understanding of how the participants' life histories shaped their views of educational institutions. The researchers sought evidence in the data that placed participants' experiences in a historical, social, and educational context. These analyses were initially conducted within participants, and then across participants, using matrices to conduct across-participants data.

To answer the second research question, codes and emergent categories were examined for evidence of ways participants made meaning of their experiences and beliefs. Specifically, the researchers sought ways in which their meaning making is directly connected to their stuttering disability. In addition, evidence in the data was sought that placed participants' experiences in a historical, social, and educational context. This analysis was conducted, first, within participants and then across participants using matrices to look across the data and to compare and contrast participants' descriptions of their experiences.

To answer the third research question the researchers used analyses and findings from the first and second questions about how participants understood their experiences, particularly in the context of educational institutions. These findings were connected to the research literature. Analysis was then conducted within and across participants using matrices to look across participants in order to create larger themes. Factors were sought that connected to the participants' (1) environmental spaces, (2) social lives, and (3) educational experiences to determine the importance of this study. The data gained through this research question address the vitality of this study as it connects participants' beliefs about how their educational experiences shaped their lives.

Findings

Student Engagement

This section sheds light on ways stuttering affected the subjects' academic engagement within educational spaces. Participants discussed their lack of involvement, coping mechanisms, physical reactions, psychological impacts, and emotional reactions.

Lack of involvement. Most participants did not focus on their stuttering until persons such as classmates, teachers, family, and friends brought to their attention as abnormal verbal communication . Examples are as follows:

TB: As a youth, I would know the answers and randomly say them out

> loud when the class was called upon to answer (sometimes leading to infractions for not raising my hand). However, if I was called upon individually, I would pretend not to know, just to be able to only say a few words out loud. This would continue until the teacher would get to know me or become aware of my speech. In middle and high schools, I could read without stuttering. Since students knew I stuttered, I would feel and see them waiting for me to stutter. It would be an anticipation that would lead me to prove, when I had to read, that I could do it flawlessly. Even when I would feel I was speaking fluently, there would always be a chuckle or a word someone would repeat with a stutter as if I had made those sounds; clearly, I learned this was just teasing by youthful individuals. So, eventually, I would began to read and pretend not to be able to sound out a word in a sentence if and when I felt a blockage coming on. This, of course, led to my not wanting to read in class or, when it would come around to me, I would go to the bathroom.

> QC: Junior high school was the first time I was really made fun of for my stuttering. I moved to a new school without any of my friends. I was teased because of my skin complexion and my stuttering. Stuttering made me shy and not participate in class discussions. Because I could not get my words out like everyone else, I chose to be quiet and not say much. When it was time to read aloud, my teachers and classmates would just look at me as I struggled to get words out. It was totally humiliating. I was never motivated to participate in school events. I remember one of my teachers required all students to read a paragraph. When it was my turn, it took me at least 10 minutes to read one paragraph. I hated forced oral class participation. They were so insensitive.

Coping strategies. Most participants explained multiple strategies they used to cope with stuttering, particularly while in classrooms. Table 2 presents strategies used by participants who engaged in the semi-structured interviews.

Some participants' coping strategies included physical reactions for stuttering management, such as easy speech techniques, breathing exercises, meditations, and other physical coping strategies. For example, several participants developed consistent routines in order to navigate through having to participate orally in classroom settings. Some examples are presented below:

> AB: Well, most of the time, I know exactly which words I know I would not be able to bring out. So, I had to find other words with the same or similar meaning to express what I'm trying to say. It does not work all the time, especially if I am speaking with my family member or close friends. I've realized when I am super relaxed, which is mainly around family and close friends, is when I have a hard time bringing the words out. Most of the time, in order to get words out in class, I tried to breathe slowly. Unfortunately, that technique rarely ever worked.

While trying to breathe slowly, I would run out of breath and then have to start all over again. Going through this routine multiple times in front of people was embarrassing for me. In addition to the breathing technique, I would try to snap my fingers as if I was singing—hoping that imagining music would help me get my words out. That technique was more helpful, but not all the time. Both techniques were obvious to other people. Sometimes, I just decided to remain silent and not say anything. Going through all of those was stressful. It seemed less stressful to simply be quiet than to force words out.

GA: The therapist suggested ways to reduce my stuttering. I complied accordingly. One suggestion was a tongue exercise – stretching the tongue back and forth for several minutes before I spoke publicly. Another coping remedy was gathering my thoughts, taking a deep breath and not focusing on the audience. I avoided going places where I suspected that they would call upon me to speak in any way. I disliked verbal introductions at school. My teachers would demand that all students participate. It was humiliating for me. I coped with those moments by not showing up to class. I believe that truancy has been a way of coping with navigating through educational institutions. Sometimes, people would laugh. For some reason, it was funny to me as well. I laughed along with them, maybe to keep from crying.

Table 2
Coping Strategies Reported by Study Participants

Name	*Coping Strategy*
QB	Looked away or off to a far distance Replaced words Stop and stretch out word
TB	Using fingers as pressure points when I feel a blockage Blinking my eyes Stomping my feet Pulling out my hair Faked like I did not know the correct answers
AB	Laugh Prolong words Leave the room
TG	Arrive late on purpose to avoid introductions Speak on topics I'm passionate about
GA	Laughed with people who laughed at me Laughed to keep from crying
CC	Close eyes tightly and pray

Physical and emotional reactions. Several participants expressed negative thoughts regarding themselves, or thought of their impediment as hopeless, because of the reactions of others such as educators, classmates, or speech therapists at educational institutions. In addition, some participants found themselves having thoughts of defeat.

> QC: I don't think people understand the deeply-seated emotions that people who stutter experience daily. As we live in a world that constantly demands a level of communication that we are unable to deliver verbally, it becomes extremely frustrating. My stuttering is awful. I remember contemplating committing suicide when I was in high school and after high school when no one would hire me. I knew it was because of my stutter at job interviews. I always thought that I would never achieve any of my career goals in life. My life decisions are now planned around the notion that I stutter. I rarely try to meet new people because my stutter sounds horrible. I'm constantly ashamed around people I don't know, and, sometimes, I am even embarrassed around people I know. I constantly think about my fate career-wise. I have never felt confident reading out loud in class or speaking at a job interview. I secretly think that my life sucks because of my stutter. What did I do to deserve this? Stuttering negatively impacted my life as a child and now as an adult. My mind is constantly bombarded with the fear of speaking and being embarrassed. School teachers consistently made me embarrassed at schools by calling upon me to read aloud and so forth… My most emotional moment was when I was giving a book report in the 6th grade. I got up in front of the class and froze. I just stood there with tears coming down my face.

> TB: The fear of my stuttering has been a reality; however, it seems to have impacted me mentally as well. The psychological impact has been deepening throughout the years. I am constantly thinking about how I will get the next word out, or if I will be successful at getting words out. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about my stuttering. A lot of people tell people who stutter to slow down and think about what they are going to say. I have been told that all of my life. However, while thinking about what I was going to say, I also had other thoughts of defeat, depression, and self-pity. I am not certain about the direction of my life, but I am certain about my spirit of determination. It is not easy being a stutterer. I try to deal with it the best way that I can. Some days are better than others. I remember trying to read aloud in elementary, middle, and high school. It felt like I was carrying thousands of pounds on my shoulders. My heart would beat very fast as everyone would stare at me. My teachers would just stand there and wait until I strained out each word. My classmates would snicker and tease me. As I would walk home from school, my peers would constantly make jokes about my stutter and even throw rocks at me. Therefore, I think bullying was a major result of my stutter. Both stuttering and being bullied lowered my motivation and self-esteem towards attending school. However, I

always reserved a space within myself for confidence and hope. As stated before, I went to the extent of pulling out my hair.

Physical setting. Several participants were natives of small communities where minimal diversity existed. Not being exposed to much diversity seemed to have a significant effect on their perceptions of the extent to which their environment was supportive.

QC: I recall my middle and high school being all lumped into one building. It was called an educational center. I had the same classmates all the time. I rarely got to meet other students in the school building. Everyone knew everyone and rarely ventured out to create friendships with other students. Therefore, most people knew I stuttered. For those who were unaware of my stutter, I tried my best to avoid talking when around them. I figured the fewer people know I stutter, the fewer people I would have to worry about teasing me. Now that I think about it, maybe I would have met some people who would not have teased me. I was very intimidated by the school environment back then. Now that I am older, I regret not meeting more people who attended the same school as I did. At the same time, because of the population of the school, I understand why I remained an introvert. The only time I would not be an introvert was when I played sports. I did not feel empowered in classrooms.

GA: My hometown did not have many people. I would say the population was around 1,300 people. The school I attended was only a fraction of the overall population. I had around 10 students in my classes. I think this small population impacted the way I thought about myself as a person who stutters. During that time, I did not get a chance to meet anyone else who stuttered. It felt weird and I felt a level of aloneness. I felt like I could not identify with anyone and that no one could really understand what I experienced daily. This was my experience in elementary, middle, and high school. It felt like I was always the elephant in the room. My experiences in my local community and school framed my worldview. I initially thought that I was the only person in the world who stuttered.

Cultural settings. The traditional practices of academic institutions affected the participants in many ways, as there are multiple facets to the experiences of people who stutter. Several participants stated their stuttering was a major contributor to their academic performance and learning experiences.

TB: It would have been great if I experienced school like some of my classmates did. Some years, I recall desiring to be a class officer or articulate big words in class like some others did. Learning could have been fun if teachers used multiple ways to educate students. Instead, it seems like teachers believed that if you did not express your knowledge verbally, it meant that you did not have a grasp of the lesson that was

taught. Most of the time, I knew the answers but just could not get it out. Because I could not get words out, I lost points for class participation. Sometimes, I would say the wrong answer on purpose just because it was easier to get out. By any means necessary, I merely just wanted the teacher not to call on me to talk aloud. However, it seems like that is simply how schools operate.

GA: I feel that I could have been an honor student if I did not stutter. I always knew the answer but could not get the words out fast enough. Instead of answering the question when called on, the easiest words to say were "I don't know." Being that I said that all the time, teachers thought that I never knew answers, while the correct answers were in my head the entire time. Back then, I no longer cared about getting a bad grade. I was more concerned about not being embarrassed or humiliated in front of my classmates. If online learning had been available when I was a child, it would have been great for me. I would have desired to attend an online school so that I could feel empowered to respond to questions. I never had a problem with writing or typing. I just failed because of the pressure to speak out aloud. I don't understand why teachers forced all students to speak aloud, especially when they knew a student had a verbal disability. I still carry these awful memories with me about school.

Invisibility. This sub-theme sheds light on aspects of stuttering that may not be observable. Participants provided information that alluded to several components of this experience, such as internalizing painful comments, living with the emotional conflicts of stuttering, and navigating environments that could require more verbal participation than others could. The following statements highlight the participants' opinion regarding the "lonely" experience of stuttering.

TB: I've come to a conclusion that many people do not understand the hurt and pain that comes as a result of being a stutterer. At the age of 18, my brother, who was a stutterer, committed suicide. Just like him, I often feel like no one is able to truly identify with what I go through as a stutterer. I've conceded too many setbacks in life because of my fear of stuttering every time I speak. People sometimes give well wishes and try to make me feel better about not being able to get words out. Unfortunately, although they may be present, I always feel like I am by myself when I am pushing to get words out in a fluent manner.

QC: The first thing people tell me to do is to slow down in order to speak more fluently. During my childhood, I strongly disliked people telling me to slow down because slowing down often made me stutter even more. After years, I came to the resolution that I am in this alone and have to figure out what works for me to get words out in a productive manner. Don't misunderstand me. I think some people who stutter may need to slow down for more fluency. That just was not for me. After a while, I preferred people not to give me any advice at all. I preferred

being by myself. At least being by myself I could think clearly. For example, I knew I had the most difficulties saying words that begin with "b's". My lips would get really tight. No air would come in nor leave. At times, I would force myself to make sounds such as "ba-ba-ba" just so I learn how to loosen my lips. Being alone provided space for me to do some self-help.

GA: Stuttering seems to control my life from the moment I wake up daily until I go to bed at night. I am continuously conscious of it. No one who is not a stutterer can really understand. Not only being a stutterer, but being an African American man who stutters. It is basically a challenge from day-to-day. While growing up, I preferred being by myself. However, the older I get, I prefer going places with people who speak fluently just in case of an emergency. Sometimes, my fluent friends interpret me in ways that I did not intend. That part upsets me. Sometimes I go through times when I don't desire to be around people. Stuttering is like you are in a world by yourself. I rarely meet another person who stutters.

Implications for Future Research

In light of these six interview responses, it is apparent that stuttering had a significant impact on the daily lives of the African American males, particularly within the context of educational settings. It is also important to understand that these experiences remain with this population beyond primary school, and continue to influence their self-identity and how they navigate career options. Awareness of these experiences can assist educators, speech-language clinicians, and researchers who interact with people who stutter.

Although the information shared by participants in the study provided new insight regarding people who stutter, there are additional perspectives that can be gained from this study. The following policy recommendations are offered for educational leaders.

1. *Develop a study using focus groups*. This would allow participants possibly to serve as sources of empowerment and advocacy for each other.

2. *Conduct longitudinal studies on individuals with SLI*. This would allow the research scope to be expanded into the mid-life experiences of this population while examining the long-term effects on people who stutter.

3. While the sample size is appropriate for a life history study, it is recommended that future research increases the sample size and *broadens the age range of participants*.

4. Although the aim of this study was to share the voices of Afri-

can American males who stutter, it is recommended that future research *capture the voices of educators, speech therapists, school administrators, parents, and other stakeholders who work with this population*.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of stuttering on the educational experiences of African American males. Using qualitative methods to draw upon their life histories, the investigator was able to find results that revealed themes associated with student engagement, school environment, emotional-laden behaviors (i.e., depression, sadness, anger, and regret) and poor outcomes (i.e., difficulty obtaining employment). This study includes a discussion of those themes in the context of problems encountered by the subjects of the research. It also provides an interpretation of the results and their implications for speech and language clinicians as well as educators. This study concludes with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Student Engagement

Previous research discussed ways stuttering can provide meaning to someone's personal experience, including self-identity, personal development, feelings, and emotions (Davis, Howell, & Cooke, 2002; Guitar, 1998; Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999; Mooney & Smith, 1994; Tatum, 1999). For example, people who stutter often internalize negative experiences from educators, supervisors, speech pathologists, media portrayals, and peers. Petrunik and Shearing (1983) highlighted three major strategies that people who stutter crafted to manage their social interactions: concealment of stuttering; openness of stuttering; and not acknowledging stuttering. The literature review shed light on the personalized results of stuttering which can include guilt, depression, shame, low self-esteem, fear, and anger. Findings from previous studies are also similar to those of the present study in regards to school experiences.

Previous studies showed that stuttering often set people apart as different. That was largely due to comical and negative societal portrayals (Tanner, 2003). Most people who stutter will make extreme adjustments to fit into a mainstream school environment (Hottle, 1996; and Klompass & Ross, 2004). Each of the participants in this study, for example, described several coping strategies employed in order to avoid showing individuals that they had a stuttering disability, specifically within classroom settings. Participants who purposely made efforts to avoid verbal communication utilized several routines in order not to be

identified as a person who stutters. For example, several participants mentioned difficulty paying attention in class because of concerns about being called upon to participate orally. Those same participants were extremely concerned about classroom activities such as introductions on the first day or being called upon to read aloud in front of their classmates. For several decades, research has shown that listeners tend to have negative perceptions of a person who stutters, which leads to negative stereotypes (Cooper & Cooper, 1996; Ham, 1990; Turnbaugh, Guitar, & Hoffman, 1979; Woods & Williams, 1976).

Several participants went through extreme measures in order to gain acceptance by embracing systemic school routines centered on stuttering. For example, participants created advanced and consistent routines, such as knowing when to have adults to contact teachers on their behalf to exempt them from oral assignments, or concocting strategic ways to ask teachers not to make them read aloud in class. TG, for example, carefully observed his teachers on the initial day of each semester and was able to decipher whether or not he needed his parents to enlighten his teacher about his stuttering disability. QC deliberately went to school very early so that he could provide teachers with notes that he had previously written, hoping that teachers would have sympathy and not call on him to talk aloud. QC also mentioned that, when he knew he had to participate orally, he would only use words that he felt was easier to say with fluency. He perceived this as a leading coping mechanism to minimize stuttering in front of his classmates. These terms of negotiation are common among students who stutter.

These coping mechanisms to prevent stuttering induced several negative behaviors and psychological characteristics. Participants mentioned experiencing intense verbal blockage, sweaty palms, nervousness, and high levels of embarrassment when participating in oral classroom assignments. For some, these reactions resulted in physical illnesses. GA, for example, experienced extreme migraine headaches after attempting to read paragraphs aloud in class. This finding is aligned with the literature on stuttering and anxiety, as this relationship was discovered in previous research (Craig, 1990; Craig, Hancock, & Tran, 2003). According to research, people who stutter are not more anxious than non-stutterers, although people who stutter mostly experience increased levels of anxiety in speaking situations.

Although most participants showed negative emotions and anxiety and put much effort into avoiding situations that would result in having to verbally communicate, other participants did not have those experiences. CC for example, reported some positive classroom experiences attributed to not focusing on the negative implications of his stuttering disability:.

> CC: My best way of dealing with stuttering was to stay focused on God. My best coping mechanism for me was to understand that God never make mistakes and it was God's plan all the time. From my disability, I learned to be patient and pay attention to how mankind treats each other regardless of whatever disabilities one may have. I only focus on the positive aspects of my life in this regard.

In addition, CC reported that his involvement in sports during middle and high school years helped to minimize teasing and bullying endured by other students who were speech impaired. CC was aware that his speech was not the same as his peers' speech. However, he rarely experienced negative reactions as a response to his stutter.

Research on identity and stigma suggests that people who stutter base their life experiences on implicit and explicit messages received from people within their environments (Gabel, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2004; Hottle, 1996). Link and Phelan (2001), for example, wrote that "stigma is largely a social process that involves labeling, linking differences to stereotype, separation, and status loss and discrimination" (p 382). The presence of stigma is evident in the experiences discussed by most participants. Link and Phelan (2001) reported that stigma starts with the process of labeling, particularly of how people identify and interpret social differences. Those differences can become salient within the mainstream population. Several participants in this study did not pay much attention to stuttering until a particular event or situation occurred that caused them to realize that their speech patterns were different from those of others. Prior to becoming aware of their perceived abnormal speech, they were socially engaged without thinking of possible negative consequences. Most participants recalled specific situations where their stuttering disability was brought to their attention. These moments were typically recanted from elementary school years.

According to Guitar (2006), elementary school years typically are the time when students interpret stuttering as having positive and negative consequences. QC, for example, was made aware of his stuttering in the fourth grade when his teacher called on him to read a poem aloud in front of the class. TG became aware of his stuttering when his cousin asked why he did not talk like everyone else. GA became aware of his stuttering when his friend comically imitated his speech. Many participants recognized that stuttering became a difference that was socially salient within classrooms. This realization caused participants to either hide their stutter through silence and avoidance or proceed to speak aloud without much care as to what people thought about them. Those participants who selected to not expose their stuttering disability began developing mitigation strategies and alternative behaviors as a direct consequence of internalizing the worth of fluent speech and the stigma that is associated with disfluency. Participants who decided not

to employ coping mechanisms appeared not to internalize negative responses about their impediment. This process is aligned with the construction of ones' identity, which includes the importance of context, culture, environment, and interactions with others as being parallel with the way ones' definition of self (Daniel & Gabel, 2004; Hottle, 1996; Tatum, 1999;).

The School Environment

As mentioned, participants had various experiences within school environments such as the playground, gymnasium, and cafeteria. These experiences included classroom participation, relationships with educators and classmates, and involvement in traditional educational settings. Previous studies showed that people who stutter often experience anxiety over the requirements and expectations of traditional schooling environments (Hayhow, Cray, & Enerby, 2002; Klompass & Ross, 2004). For example, Hayhow, Cray, and Enerby (2002), conducted a study that sought to determine the impact of stuttering in the daily lives of people who stutter. Results of a postal questionnaire (N=32) revealed that 56% of the participants reported that the educational environments environmental settings affected their lives more than their occupation, leisure, friendships, or relationships.

Participants in this study discussed various ways their educational experiences were affected. Similar to findings by Hayhow, Cray and Enderby (2002), the most commonly cited response to stuttering at school was to avoid such difficult situations as reading aloud and asking or answering questions in class. Many also remembered being unhappy at school because other children teased them and they were not understood by teachers. Some commented they had not benefited from school as much as they had hoped.

These findings were aligned with those of the current study. Most participants mentioned oral participation enhanced fear and anxiety. Other participants discussed how their attention span in class was affected because they were preoccupied with figuring out ways to mitigate and avoid being asked to speak aloud. This avoidance caused them to escape by sitting in the rear of the classroom, being tardy to class, or not attending class at all. These findings were also aligned with the researcher's personal experience. I, too, purposely arrived late or did not attend class on the first day, as, normally, the teacher asked every student formally introduce him/herself. These particular experiences are petrifying and humiliating for persons with speech or language impairments. Personally, there were times when I would hide out in the school restroom until I felt

the time for introductions had passed. After communicating with others, I learned that I was not alone in this behavior.

Instead of becoming a part of the educational experience, the participants chose focused on their stuttering disability, and this focus resulted in anxiety. In addition to the traditional school environment, relationships with educators and classmates emerged as a vital part of the educational experience. Klompass and Ross (2004) discovered that participants in their study discussed positive and negative relationships with educators and classmates. Positive experiences involved teachers who showed compassion towards their disability and classmates who embraced students who appeared to be different. Previous studies showed that educators who possess an understanding of stuttering tend to have a better attitude and reasonable classroom requirements to accommodate students who stutter (Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). According to Stumpers (2005), "it is imperative that young adolescents have the ability to choose and engage in appropriate peer social networks as a source of emotional support, information, orientation and guidance (pp. 258-259).

Throughout K-12, students with speech impairments receive therapy. All participants in this study discussed their experiences with speech therapy while in school to varying degrees. Each of them discussed breathing and behavioral skillsets used in order to increase fluency. However, for the most part, they were not taught to focus on the psychological effects of stuttering. Several participants reported that support groups and counseling may have improved the experiences they endured within classroom settings. For example, GA reported:

> Throughout my grade school experience, I always attended speech therapy. I also read a lot of books regarding various ways that could possibly increase fluency among people who stutter. However, I always felt alone because I never met anyone else in my school environment who stuttered, not even the therapist. I wish there were a local support group of some type. I am just finding out about national organizations such as the National Stuttering Association. When I was in grade school, White students at other schools seemed to have access to more resources to help them overcome stuttering. I did not have much help.

Several participants received speech therapy after they became adults. Many of them felt that therapy was more helpful during their adult years than when they were in grade school. For example, they felt that speech language pathologists' did not only focus on breathing techniques and theories as they did throughout their childhood years. Instead, into their adult years, therapists also offered advice that would address emotional and psychological challenges that are prevalent among people who have speech disabilities. According to several scholars, speech language pathologists have increased their awareness of psychological challenges that persist among SLI persons. In the past, they were not as comfortable providing

psychological therapy to people who stutter (St. Louis & Durrenbeger, 1993; Yairi & Williams, 1970; Yaruss & Quesal, 2002).

These experiences within school environments support the work of Link and Phelan's (2001) concept of stigma. They linked the stuttering disability to stigma and psychological challenges that are often prevalent among people who stutter. There is a large research base on this on the stigma associated with stuttering (Davis, Howell, & Cooke, 2002; Franck, Jackson, Pimentel, & Greenwood, 2003; Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999; Silverman & Marik, 1993). These studies have been consistent in showing that educators, school leaders, and peers associate stuttering with negative attributes such as nervousness, fear, and anxiety. Participants in this study shared experiences that alluded to their negative treatment within school environments. They felt that negative treatment were associated with the stigma that is placed on people who stutter. For example, CC felt like he was never selected by his peers to be in their reading groups or debate teams due to their perception of his stuttering. CC mentioned that some people called him mentally retarded because of his level of disfluency. In addition, he said teachers often placed him in lower level reading groups. TB said the following regarding engagement with his peers:

> TB: My experiences at school were very challenging because of my stutter. I dreaded being treated like that for the remainder of my life. I still recall being told by my teacher to read a paragraph aloud in the third grade. One of my classmates said "why do he sound retarded". Thereafter, I just paused and cried. That moment always stayed in my mind.

Link and Phelan's (2001) concept of stigma also included separation, status loss, and discrimination. Separation comes as a result of an "us" versus "them" division. As a result of stuttering, participants immediately recognized the separation between them and their peers. The researcher experienced this separation as well. Particularly during the K-12 years, my speech impairment caused me to suffer from low self-esteem, depression, humiliation, thoughts of suicide, being bullied, placed in danger, and some physical fights. Several participants reported that not having contact with someone else who stuttered was a weakness for their development as adolescents. In regards to status loss and discrimination, they reported "stigmatized groups are disadvantaged when it comes to a general profile of life chances like income, education, psychological well-being, housing status, medical treatment, and health" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 371). The participants in this study discussed their experiences with nervous breakdowns, sweaty palms, hair loss, increased heart-rates, migraines, psychological challenges, and thoughts of suicide. In addition, many strongly believed that having a stuttering disability separated them from their peers who did not stutter.

AB: I had extremely low self-esteem. It was really depressing in many regards. I felt like I had no hope.

Interviewer: What made you feel without hope?

AB: Well, I guess I felt like no one understood what I was going through. Stuttering handicapped my life in school. I desired to be a part of organizations at school, but chose not to due to fear of stuttering. I was not only scared and nervous. In many ways, I felt like I was cursed or, in some way, a victim. I never understood why me? Why did I have to endure this and not be regular like other people? In addition, not only being a person who stutters, but placed in this environment that was not accommodating to people who stutter. Overall, I just felt alone, basically.

AB's experiences represent the sense of hopelessness some people who stutter feel. Several studies have proven that people who stutter are mostly placed in classrooms where their peers do not have a stuttering disability (Bloodstein, 1995; Guitar, 2006). Therefore, educators may not always know how to address the needs of this student population. Although the population of students who stutter may be low, it is imperative that school teachers, administrators, and peers become aware of ways to incorporate these students into a comfortable learning environment. Educators and students who do not stutter play roles in the educational experiences of persons who stutter. For example, CC felt that one of his teachers did not place him in higher level reading groups because of his stutter. QC's classroom experience differed from CC's. His teachers provided him with reasonable accommodations. Through these experiences, it is clear that educators are influential social agents and have the power to manipulate how students perceive centers for education.

Post-Educational Experiences

For most, the challenges of stuttering go beyond childhood and into adulthood. Past studies have shown that psychological and emotional reactions are prevalent among this population (Bloodstein, 1995; Davis, Howell & Cooke, 2002). The experiences of people who stutter within educational environments are based on several positive and negative factors that depend on the environmental practices of the school. These environmental practices can also affect the lives of people who stutter outside of the school context and into adulthood.

Participants in this study discussed not only their experiences within educational environments, but also expounded upon their past and current experiences as adults who stutter. Most confessed that they were motivated to select careers that required less talking, such as that of a custodian, barber, or engineer. For example, after high school, TG spent four years in the military and then decided to be trained as

a barber, while GA decided to be a custodian. QC shared his challenges with communicating at job interviews. The researcher's experience has been quite similar. I have had to accept employment in the service arena at local restaurants and libraries. I have also worked cutting grass and have pan-handled. Even though I have advanced degrees, no one would hire me for career positions. In one year, I went on over 40 interviews for careers I am qualified to be in. These experiences, along with those of the respondents, help to give credibility to prior research, which has shown that stuttering has significant effects on a person's employment experiences (Guitar, 2006; Daniels, Hagstrom, & Gabel, 2006; Hottle, 1996).

In addition to modifying higher education and career choices, participants mentioned ways stuttering influenced their identity and personality. TB believed that stuttering made him more understanding, sympathetic, sensitive, accommodating, and patient with people who have other disabilities such as blindness, deafness, or any mental challenges. Several studies suggested that stuttering can have an impact on one's identity, self-image, and personality (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Daniel & Gabel, 2004).

Current Personal Reflections

Through the interview process, participants discussed their current impressions of the climate of educational environments, the daily experiences of people who stutter in comparison to their peers who do not stutter, and their observations of people with various types of disabilities. Some believe that, due to the special education mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act of 2004, the school climate for people who stutter is better in comparison to what they experienced while in school. They believed that the special education mandates were designed to accommodate students with disabilities such as those who stutter or have other speech or language impairments. The IDEA law included an individualized education plan (IEP) in order to meet the unique needs of each student (Heward, 2009, p. 19). In addition, they believed speech or language therapists looked beyond simply teaching breathing techniques and addressed the psychological and emotional needs of people who stutter. While some participants believed that the school climate had gotten better, other participants perceived that the school climate for students who stutter was still problematic. This perception draws attention to the work of Frank (2003), who suggested that peers who do not stutter view people who stutter as being less intelligent and as having negative characteristics. Therefore, students who stutter may still be more vulnerable to bullying and teasing by peers.

As discussed through the interviews, participants observed the

treatment of speech or language impairments in comparison to other disabilities. In light of their personal experiences in school and within their careers, many felt that people who stutter do not receive nearly as much attention or support as persons with other disabilities. In essence, people who stutter are "put on the back burner" in the hierarchy of disabilities. Participants believed this was due to the lack of awareness and advocacy on behalf of people who stutter. Bento (1996) stated, "the physical landscape of academia is being changed to accommodate the special needs of the students with disabilities: ramps are being constructed; workstations are being modified; Braille signs are being added to classroom doors, elevators, offices, ATMs and soda machines" (p. 1). However, none of these accommodations are geared towards people who stutter. Further empirical studies are still needed to provide additional data on this topic.

Lastly, participants discussed the invisibility of stuttering. It is evident that stuttering interrupts the fluency of speech production. However, stuttering also causes a litany of behaviors and emotional reactions that people who do not stutter may not be privy to or come to understand. According to participants, these behaviors can include selecting words that are easier to convey fluently, escaping environments where talking is required, spending plenty of energy focusing on words to say, not going on dates, and internalizing negative remarks. For example, GA stated, "I knew I was different because of my stutter, so I always tried to engage myself in organizations and groups that required less talking. It took a lot of energy and time trying to figure this out."

Interpretation of the Results

The educational experiences and beliefs of the participants in this study provided support to previous research and theories on the stuttering disability. As previously mentioned, the term disability has been defined using medical, social, and environmental models (McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Smart, 2001). Medical models primarily give attention to the physical manifestations of disability, while social and environmental models focus on the restrictions on everyday living and participation that a person who stutters faces. Along with the concept of disability, stuttering has been shown to have behavioral and multidimensional influences (Johnson, 1944; Smith, 1999; Yaruss & Quesal, 2004).

Results of this study provide support to previous research that identified stuttering as a multidimensional problem. The analysis of narrative transcripts revealed the participants' characteristics, peer-to-peer interactions, teacher-to-peer interactions, educational environments's policies and practices, and demographic information about schools the

participants attended. These components emerged as themes from the participants' educational life histories. In addition, the participants' stories about their educational experiences were consistent with school experiences that are shown within the body of literature on stuttering (Baker & Donelly, 2001; Guitar, 2006; Murray & Greenburg, 2006).

The themes that emerged from this study show that a person can be equally as disabled by individuals' perception of him/her as s/he is by the actual physical disability itself. Previous research suggested that perceptions of people who stutter can affect their livelihood (Gabel, 2004; Dorsey & Guenther, 2000). Therefore, it is imperative to pay attention to these aspects of the stuttering experience. Further research on peers' perceptions of people who stutter, as well as research on the social experiences of people who stutter, can provide vital information for educators, school administrators, researchers, and speech-language pathologists.

Concluding Thoughts

We argue that being SLI alone does not cause adverse effects on a child's educational performance. We contend that the educational environment, social spaces, and lack of institutional tolerance contribute to the students' low self-esteem, self-worth, and expectations thereby adversely affecting the students' ability to achieve on the level of their peers who are not SLI. Research has shown that children who find school uninviting are more likely to become academically disengaged.

The personal narratives from this population of African American males have been largely unheard. Their experiences with racism, social marginalization, and educational achievement have engendered among them significantly. While existing research studies on educational institutions and people who stutter provided a foundation for this study (see Lass et al., 1992; Smith, 1999; Smart, 2001), this study contributes significantly to the literature on the educational and social experiences of SLI students of color.

This research study attempted to capture the voices of African American males who stutter while carefully comparing their voices to what scholars have published regarding the experiences of people who stutter. It is also hoped that their voices will help to provoke future studies that will enhance our knowledge about the life histories and experiences of people who stutter.

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