

Express Yourself: An Auto-Ethnographic Poetic Account

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Abstract

To counter the narratives about African American males in special education, my poetic account represents the voice of a gifted AA male with dyslexia. I applied critical disability theory to learn, and become mindful, about my academic journey and how my identity was shaped. As an auto-ethnographer, I examined my schooling to understand my cultural experiences. Furthermore, after immersing myself in the literature of auto-ethnography poetry, I quickly recognized that this method would allow me to compose my stories and inspire students who are placed into special education that they too can reach their full academic capabilities. The organization of this account begins with a description of my method followed by a short description of who I am. Next, in the section entitled *Express Yourself: An Auto-Ethnographic Poetic Account*, I provide four poems followed by classroom pedagogy. Moreover, it is important to realize that scholarship rarely captures the voices of this population.

Keywords: African American; dyslexia; giftedness; poetry; auto-ethnographic; Critical Disability Theory.

Introduction

I begin by contextualizing my poetic account by using the lyrics of the song *Express Yourself* written by O'Shea Jackson aka Ice Cube (1989).

“...I'm expressin' with my full capabilities,
And now I'm livin' in correctional facilities...”

I frame my correctional experiences from the perspective of a former African American (AA) male in special education who faced more punishments for my aggressive conduct than teachers trying to acknowledge the root causes of my behavior. I was unable to read, unconscious of my full academic capabilities, felt shackled, misguided, and mis-educated, which all impacted my identity (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Woodson, 1933). Moreover, as a bi-racial individual, society did not stop and say, “since you have a White mother, we are going to provide you certain privileges and social/capital access.” Instead, society treated me as a nigga, and at a young age, some teachers started tagging me with certain identifiers and placing me in self-contained classes with all AA males (Robinson, 2016a).

Regrettably, this is how the pipeline to prison begins, and how individuals get tagged with more serious identifiers (i.e., criminals) (Alexander, 2010). In fact, some teachers do not

develop an awareness of the specific academic and social needs of AA males living at the intersection of giftedness and dyslexia who are placed in special education (Robinson, 2017a). For instance, because I was a student who stood 6'3”, some teachers just saw color and had a prepackaged notion about my identity and ability. Thus, when I was placed in special education, my capabilities were overshadowed not only because of the color of my skin, but also from institution policies and microaggressions (Blanchett, 2010).

Consequently, my capabilities were disregarded because I was shuffled through a system that has been designed to exclude AA males, especially in special education. Having those experiences resulted in me feeling voiceless and hopeless through most of my academic journey, and being tagged with identifiers that socially constructed my identity - who I was and later became (Robinson, 2017b). Connor (2006) states that the “...voices of [AA]

males in special education and how they understand their position [capabilities] in the academic system are noticeably absent from traditional scholarship” (p. 154). A major factor behind the voices of AA students being absent in the literature is that there are some teachers who frame those students’ learning abilities from a ‘deficit’ rather a strength-based perspective (Robinson, 2016b).

Therefore, my poetic account serves as a platform that not only allowed me to express

myself, but to also rewrite the description given to AA males in special education who have not reached their full academic capabilities (Ferri, 2006; Grantham, Ford, & Henfield, 2011). Furthermore, the word “I” is used because the methodological approach is based on a form of qualitative research in which the author engages in self-reflection and writings to reveal personal experiences (Chang, 2013). Applying auto-ethnography permitted me a voice for a population that had essentially been silenced in academic and sociopolitical realms.

Auto-Ethnographic and Critical Disability Theory

My poems are intended to provide a deeper understanding about my position in the academic system as a gifted AA male with dyslexia. Writing these poems allowed me to make reflections and analyses of the situations in my constructed reality as a former special education student who graduated reading at an elementary level as well as provide a transformational experience (Robinson, 2013). I write about my experiences by contextualizing my *lebenswelt* through the lens of both James Weldon Johnson, a civil rights activist and poet, and contemporary scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates. First, Johnson was dissatisfied with the cultural stereotypes that were circulated in the 1900s, and in 2017 certain stereotypes remain towards AA, especially males in special education.

Second, Coates’s book *Between the World and Me* (2015) is a framework for understanding America’s rich culture and history, our current educational calamity, and the social inequality that AA students experience within the systems (Davis, 2016). Like Coates, as I became conscious, I had no reason to constrict myself to make others feel comfortable, especially when advocating for AA males who are in an oppressive state within the special education system. Furthermore, Coates explained that the destroyer’s (i.e., oppressors) are rarely help accountable, and in this context, they are not help responsible for the failure to teach AA males in special education. Yet, the oppressor still receives their pension (Coates, 2015).

Overall, the propaganda concerning the status of AA males in special education with

learning disabilities (LD) that are widespread by teachers who have lower academic standards or frame their students’ learning from a deficit perspective are detrimental to their psyche. To counter the false narratives written about AA males, many 20th and 21st Century social scientists have had a desire to examine appropriate methodologies to portray the reality and identity of AAs, especially those who are gifted and have a LD (Connor, 2008; 2006; Ford, 2013).

For instance, Coates asserts that his writings have been a result of his lived experiences, which is what I hope to accomplish. Further, we both share some commonalities regarding our educational experiences as AA males. Like Coates, at a young age, school seemed useless to me as the special education system had failed me. However, things changed when I meet Dr. Robert T. Nash who taught me how to read and accepted me into a college remedial program. During this time, I then pursued my studies at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh where I underwent an intellectual awakening by learning to read, and understanding the sound structure of the American English language (i.e., linguistics) (Wolf, 2007). In the end, like Coates, once I found the value in education and the freedom it provided, I became more conscious about how society treated me prior to learning to read as an AA male. Thus, my degrees (i.e., Bachelors, M.Ed., & Ph.D.) then had opened doors into rooms where educational decisions were made about policies, which not only allowed me access, but also challenge the status que, and the oppressor (Freire, 1970).

My Narrative: Encountering Chauvinism against Individuals with Disabilities

Writing my narrative through auto-ethnographic poetry and critical disability theory tapped into my creativity, and general intellectual and specific academic abilities, which all went unnoticed as a former AA male in the Pk-12 special education system. My experiences are the foundation of my quest for academic egalitarianism and social justice, and utilizing auto-ethnography allowed me to be innovative with not only conveying my lived experiences, but also confronting ableism and educational biases. Thus, like Johnson and Coates' literature on identity and culture, I too found myself learning about how giftedness, race, and dyslexia constructed my identity.

As Johnson and Coates share throughout their literature and poetry, I too became conscious about how my lived experiences were connected, and shaped who I am, which also allowed me to find a voice and break my silence (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). Moreover, the use of poetry is a source of knowledge that captures situations through telling that not only describes raw emotion and provides thick and rich descriptions, but can also help readers determine if my story speaks to them about their own experiences through the situations described, or about the lives of others.

Furthermore, my auto-ethnographic poetry employs critical disability theory as a lens to examine my lived experiences (Blinne, 2010). This theory examines how individuals with different disabilities are subjugated and excluded from society (Reid & Knight, 2006). My race was a major factor in how I was treated by society, and teachers lacking knowledge on dyslexia, which resulted in my anger overshadowing my capabilities.

Thus, if teachers do not acknowledge dyslexia and giftedness as a social construct, students will continue to receive identifiers from a deficit perspective. Next, I offer a short description, called *Who I Am* before moving into my auto-ethnography poetry entitled *Express Yourself: An Auto-Ethnographic Poetic Account* that includes four critical aspects: (1) policy and standardized assessments, (2) teacher takes risk, (3) the aftermath, and (4) inspired, which were all part of my identity development.

Who I am

I was gifted, but my frustrations shifted my abilities;
It seemed I was lonely because I was the only "other," who lacked identity, and treated like a special act;
I was trying to cope with the discrepancies between my abilities, and disabilities, but received more penalties;
Not receiving adequate reading curriculum, kept me locked up like an inmate;
I felt a sense of isolation and, disengagement, which resulted in altercations, and disciplinary arrangements;
I constantly faced the race that set me a-part from the start;
I was always identifying for behavior status, occupying the space that was more of a hiding place, for those they see as "terrifying";
I eventually viewed my cultural identities, which included the intersections of race, dyslexia and gifted as my sources of power;
Having this knowledge, allowed me to navigate college;
I persisted, and dismissed all stories that place AA males in special education into deficit perspectives.

Express Yourself: An Auto-Ethnographic Poetic Account

Scholars continue to recognize an array of causes that affect the identification rates of AA males who are underserved across both gifted education and special education. For instance, some causes that contribute are: (1) school policies and standardized assessments, and (2) deficit thinking

(Mayes & Moore, 2016). Another aspect that is limited in the literature is the voices of this population (Fries-Britt, 2002).

Policy and standardized assessments

The impact of the academic policies kept me tracked
 My learning was viewed from a deficit, which left me not having an identity element
 Majority of my PK-12 schooling, was spent being punished by the rulings
 Being moved to more restrictive environments, constricted me from learning
 The misdiagnosis and mistreatment remained elusive, which was abusive
 Standardized tests characterized me as a charity case, and kept me oppressed
Teachers lived in fear, showed their doubt, and kept me out!

Teacher takes risk vs judging my ability

As many teachers ignored me
 I had one teacher who took a risk, and helped me escape
 He had perceptions and no misconceptions about my full capabilities
 His decision and vision were not based on race, but noticed my anger, and that I was in danger
 He was all about nurturing, and encouraging
 Said, he was taking a chance, to see me advance.

The aftermath

Graduating high school reading at an elementary grade level, left many thinking if I would be succeeding
 Sent into the unforgiving world, livid from not reading
 Started college irritated, but had faculty who never underestimated
 They elevated me so I didn't think I was a mistake, and become a-part of the academic attrition and unemployment rates
 Helped me navigate systems that discouraged, instead of nourished me

Inspired

After a total of 18 years in the academy I flipped the script on educators who had doubt, and tried to keep me out.
 My journey has led me to proceed with my creativity to inspire other AA males in special education to reject all negativities and reach their full capabilities
 My voice allows Brothers in the trenches to know they have a choice to rejoice!

Classroom Strategies

Based on my lived experiences and reflecting on my poetic account, I offer a few recommendations for teachers who are looking to tap into students' capabilities. First, there are a variety of assessments types, but I believe performance assessments that directly measure the domain-specific construct that a student shows interest in is crucial as it will tap into their creativity, general intellectual, and specific academic abilities (Leslie & Caldwell, 2009).

Second, teachers may want to incorporate scaffolding techniques that include, but are not limited to: direct instruction, making connections to students' prior knowledge, and use visual aids (i.e., graphic organizer) (Palincsar & Schutz, 2011). Third, classroom instruction may also contain culturally responsive pedagogy that enhances students' learning by using cultural referents, which aid in students expressing their full capabilities through hands-on activities (Paris & Ball, 2009). Fourth, through trial and error, teachers are continuously discovering their students' strengths by not only incorporating strength-based learning strategies, but also maximizing their students' social networks

(Yosso, 2005). Overall, if AA males in special education are not provided opportunities that tap into their strengths, and their learning is framed from a deficit perspective they will continue to be disengaged and feel isolated (Ferri & Connor, 2014).

Conclusion

I hope my story resonates and inspires other AA males in special education to keep their head high, eyes to the sky, and stand strong through the storm of life. Moreover, I share my story to serve as a platform to voice my lived experiences, express myself, and rewrite the narrative given to hundreds of AA males in special education that they can reach their full academic capabilities. Overall, with the limited research that gives gifted AA males with dyslexia in special education a venue to voice their academic concerns and limitations, teachers could offer them a pen to scribe reflective knowledge, which provides them the opportunity to showcase their full capabilities, and tell the world their truth about how they see their positions in the academic system. Providing them these opportunities, could open the doors of creativity for AA males in special education whose general intellectual and specific academic abilities are continuously overlooked.

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About the Author

Shawn Anthony Robinson, Ph.D. is an independent scholar and dyslexia consultant whose research focuses on the intersection of race, giftedness and dyslexia. He brings a wealth of academic and personal experience, training and knowledge about the development of dyslexia and creativity. Robinson is recognized as an emerging scholar who addresses inequalities in the fields of Language and Literacy and Special Education, and has written numerous peer-reviewed publications (i.e., *Disability & Society*; *Journal of African American Males in Education*; *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*; *The International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity*). Robinson's story has been highlighted on NBC News in an article titled "This Man is Searching For a Link Between Illiteracy and Racial Bias."

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