"Watch Your Tone"

The Experiences of African American Parents of Students on the Autism Spectrum in Parent-School Partnerships

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Introduction

The success of all school-age children relies heavily on active engagement between caregivers and school communities (Francis et al., 2016). Meaningful parent–school partnerships involve reciprocal relationships that build on each other's expertise and are based on good communication, professional competence, advocacy, commitment, equality, and trust (Kyzar, Haines, Turnbull, & Summers, 2017).

However, many African Americans struggle with school partnerships (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Williams, Pemberton, & Dyce, 2012). In special education, family–school partnership is particularly important and is mandated by federal law as part of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 2004 because of the need for shared decisions on the child's educational goals, services, and placement.

African American Families With Children on the Autism Spectrum

African American students on the autism spectrum and their families face

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three types of challenges that lead to inequitable outcomes.

First, the literature has shown that disparities begin at the time of the autism diagnosis. Compared to their White peers, African American children are diagnosed at a later age, or they get misdiagnosed (as having an intellectual disability or a behavior disorder; Mandell, Novak, & Zubritsky, 2005; Mandell et al., 2009; Pearson & Meadan, 2018). Consequently, vital early interventions and related services and supports are missed.

Furthermore, many are confronted with misunderstandings about their child's behavior and a lack of support in their own families and communities (Yu, 2017). According to Mandell et al. (2009), the nature of these challenges and lack of access could arise from how these families navigate help-seeking activities, advocacy/support, and practitioner interactions.

Second, African American families or caregivers are challenged when they enter the special education system, having to deal with multiple cultural barriers in a system that requires intense parent advocacy (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Lovelace, Tamayo, & Robertson, 2018; Pearson & Meadan, 2018). Special education is a complex macrosystem infused with an unspoken belief system, copious technical jargon, and tacit knowledge with which underrepresented groups are severely out of touch.

Parents of children in underrepresented groups may choose not to show up for individualized education program (IEP) meetings and parent–teacher conferences for fear of revealing deficiencies in their own knowledge and because of cultural incongruity (Harry, 1992;

Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). In most cases, a postsecondary education is required to fully comprehend the fundamentals of special education literature (Gomez Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012).

Third, the competencies that parents of color bring to the table are often unrecognized. A recent national survey in special education showed that one of the most concerning issues in this field is the difficulty special education teachers, who are most often White, have when engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Fowler, Coleman, & Bogdan, 2019). Professionals see these parents mainly through a deficit lens, which impedes partnerships (Hale & Franklin, 2001; Irvine, 2012; Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014).

These issues found in the literature underscore the need for further investigation into the perspectives of African American parents to deepen this research and learn from them why the noted inequalities in diagnosis, early intervention and related services, caregivers' ability to advocate effectively, and fragile parent–school partnerships are perpetuated in our field.

Theoretical Framework

A promising framework for enhancing trusting partnerships and knowledge sharing among education professionals, parents, and caregivers is based on the community of practice. *Communities of practice*, as Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) conceptualized them, "are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this

area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). Several studies have shown that when teachers and parents engage as communities of practice, concurrent with collaboratively reshaping educational practice, new identities and relationships are formed (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Mortier, 2018; Mortier, Hunt, Leroy, Van de Putte, & Van Hove, 2010).

Communities of practice break through typical expert models of knowledge, instead thriving on trust and equal participation. As such, a recent study uncovered how school leaders who were attentive to shaping school culture were successful at creating and maintaining school trust and family engagement (Francis et al., 2016). Francis et al. found that partnerships between families and professionals could only be based in trust if the culture of the school community promoted "a sense of belonging and membership for all stakeholders, including school professionals, students, and families" (p. 291).

Research Focus

This research aimed to build on the existing literature by gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences of African American parents of children on the autism spectrum within their families and communities and their experiences and needs while navigating school communities. This study includes the voices not only of African American parents of children on the autism spectrum but also of African American cultural brokers.

A *cultural broker* is an advocate engaged in the purposeful act of connecting people of differing cultural backgrounds to improve collaboration (Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001; Rossetti, Sauer, Bui, & Ou, 2018). Cultural brokers in the context of family–school partnerships have an affinity with the family as well as with the special education system, and can help bridge existing gaps (Smiley, Howland, & Anderson, 2008). Typically, cultural brokers in special education are parents of children with disabilities themselves; some run support groups for parents within their cultural groups.

Parents and cultural brokers reflected on the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of African American parents of children on the autism spectrum within their family and community?

2. What are the experiences and the needs of African American families with children on the autism spectrum while navigating school communities,

according to the parents and according to African American cultural brokers?

Methods

Participants

Parents. Participants met the following criteria: (a) must identify as an African American parent or guardian of a child on the autism spectrum and (b) must have either previously acquired an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for their child or be working toward obtaining an IEP due to autism-like behaviors or characteristics consistent with the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2003).

Purposive and snowball sampling procedures were used to recruit parents (Maxwell, 2013). After the authors received institutional review board approval, special education colleagues, family members, and school communities were contacted by email and Facebook messages. Five participants were secured this way, and these participants, in turn, helped the researchers connect to six more parents. Seven mothers and two couples participated in the study.

All individuals in this study resided in one of two Bay Area counties in California, and their children attended, or had previously attended, public schools in five school districts in this urban area. Table 1 shows the African American student/parent and teacher demographics in their school districts. Table 2 presents demographic information about parent participants and their children.

Cultural brokers. Participants met the following criterion: must have supported/advocated for at least one African American family in the process of navigating the special education system. Again, through the process of snowball sampling, parent participants indicated

several individuals who supported their families throughout the years. This led to six cultural brokers who agreed to participate in the study, three of whom were also parents of children on the autism spectrum. Demographics of the cultural brokers also appear in Table 2.

Data Collection

In-depth, semiscripted interviews were used for exploring the parents' perspectives on the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). These questions were open ended and included follow-up questions. The rational for the question trajectory was to utilize concrete situations of (positive and negative) family and school interactions to elicit dialogue of underlying mechanisms that can generate a positive difference in transforming partnerships between family and school.

Lichtman (2013) recommended this approach to uncover essential insights about a topic. The individual interviews were conducted by the first author at a convenient location for each parent or family and were audio recorded to ensure accuracy. The interview protocol can be found in Figure 1.

The first author and an assistant moderator conducted a focus group interview with participants who had been cultural brokers for an African American family. Owing to scheduling difficulties, two sessions were done through the online Zoom video platform. Each session was audio recorded for accuracy of the data. The interview questions can be found in Figure 2.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once all verbatim transcriptions of audio recordings were completed, participants were asked to verify their accuracy. The raw data were used to perform a line-by-line analysis, which resulted in a total of 235 descriptive codes. Next, the descriptive codes were used to identify clusters of meaning or

Table 1
Participant School District Demographics

School District	African American Students	Autistic African American Students	White Teachers	African American Teachers
A	18.4%	25	56.9%	9.8%
B	26%	50	79.2%	5.6%
C	26.7%	202	53.5%	18.7%
D	18.8%	30	69.1%	6.6%
E	10.9%	49	54.7%	9.7%

categories (Lichtman, 2013). This led to 35 categories.

The first author continued to revisit focus group and parent interview data to refine categories based on discussions with participants and coresearchers, as described in the credibility procedures below. Ultimately, seven themes emerged depicting the phenomenon under investigation.

Credibility Procedures

Member checks. Participants were offered multiple opportunities to clarify their responses and to provide additional data during the interviews. In addition, 9 out of the 11 parents checked the interview transcripts for accuracy.

Triangulation and collaborative work. This research used two data sources (parents and cultural brokers) to look at the topic under investigation. In addition, collaborative work was used to decrease subjectivity and bias and included the following measures: two researchers involved in study design and in development of interview protocols, an assistant moderator present during focus group interviews, and three researchers involved in data analysis.

Interrater reliability. A graduate student coded a verbatim transcript of a parent interview. The result was 92.8% agreement for 52 out of 56 codes that emerged independently. In addition, the analysis process was done in close collaboration with the second author, who independently coded two of the transcripts. The two authors engaged in continuous critical discussion about the interpretation of emerging patterns and definitions of categories and themes.

Thick description. The researchers used descriptions and quotes from the data to describe the context, detail, emotion, and webs of social relationships participants and their children experience.

Findings

Autism in the African American Family and Community

Isolation. Six of the nine parent participants experienced feelings of isolation in their role of parenting a child on the autism spectrum. Parent experiences of isolation varied. Some parents discussed having been ostracized from their nuclear families, but the general feeling was a lack of membership in their extended families and communities. Many parents were emotional during this segment.

Table 2
Parent Demographics

Name	Education	Occupation	Child's Age	IEP Eligibility	Classroom Designation
1. Ali	Diploma	Retail Manager	4	Autism	Non-public school
2. Lisa	Some Col.	Facility manager	4	Autism	Non-public school
3. Sheri	Bachelor's	Project manager	8	Autism	Fully included
4. Val	Bachelor's	Financial planner	8	Autism	Fully included
5. Ron	Associate's	Electrician	8	Autism	Fully included
6. Wilma	Master's	Special ed. teacher	8	Speech	Fully included
7. Lauren	Diploma	Homemaker/ site employee	9	Autism	Special day class
8. Karen	Master's	Special ed. teacher	15	Autism	Special day class
9. Sarah	Diploma	Operations clerk	16	Autism	Special day class
10. Brenda	Diploma	Unemployed	16	Autism	Special day class
11. Sandy	Bachelor's	Real estate	26	Autism	4-year university

Broker Demographics

Name	Education	Occupation	Years in current field	Child in SPED
12. Millie	Master's	Public school principal	20 years	No
13. Cheryl	Master's	Coordinator of educ. services (former public school prin.)	18 years	No
14. Janet	Doctorate	Program director	22 years	No
Val*	Bachelor's	Financial planner	12 years	Yes
Wilma*	Master's	Special education teacher	9 years	Yes
Karen*	Master's	Special education teacher	22 years	Yes

Figure 1
Parent Interview Protocol

Please state your name, child's age, and a fun activity or outing you like to do as a family. (*Warm up question*)

Your child has been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. What do you feel is important for your child, and does the school community share your views?

How do you feel about the representation of autism in the African American community?

Does your child have an IEP? If so, can you remember how you went about obtaining it?

Can you give two instances of positive interactions between yourself and the school)? (*Follow up: What made this happen?*)

Can you describe two instances of disconnect/distrust between yourself and the school? (*Follow up: What made this happen? What could have made a positive difference?*)

Who were the key people/advocates for you and your child? How have they made a difference?

Do you feel there is a need for more support (help or assistance) for African American parents of children with autism / on the autism spectrum in navigating parent-school partnerships? If so, what would that look like?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

A parent revealed that her thoughts "may be painful and sad sometimes, but we keep it moving." Two other parents reported that church was a place for support and comfort in their community. Nonetheless, the data show that the majority of parents felt that the lack of inclusion in their communities was a disservice to their children.

Unfamiliar disability. All parent participants revealed that their families and/or communities were largely unaware of autism or how characteristics of autism may impact an individual. Participants reported that their family members often denied the existence of the disability, even when face-to-face with children on the autism spectrum.

A parent described her feelings surrounding the lack of acceptance of autism: "Black and Brown people have not been in the spaces that create the diagnosis. . . . There has been this culture around acceptance for White people, but not Black people." Throughout the interviews, parents repeatedly voiced feelings of frustration and disappointment as they discussed their experiences with family members who were unaware of the broad definition of autism and its nuances.

School Community

Parents identified empowering and disempowering experiences. Table 3 shows the representativeness of the themes across participants.

Empowering experiences. Parents described positive and effective communication as an empowering experience. Nine parents described that having a say in the decision-making process (e.g., changes in school and/or classroom placements, the selection of a new classroom teacher) presented opportunities for growth for their children.

As an example, a parent stated, "They definitely changed a lot of his goals on his IEP. . . . They worked with us. I felt like we were being heard. It was a great experience." There were significantly fewer data on this topic due to participant interviews and focus groups becoming overshadowed by disempowering or negative experiences. Nevertheless, there was clear agreement regarding the types of experiences parents felt empowered them.

Disempowering Experiences

Parents reported several disempowering experiences.

Implementation/quality of service. Participants said their children or the children in their school community were not receiving (a) the quality of instruction or (b) the quantity of related services that they believed were warranted. Participants described their children's special day classes and/or general education classrooms as lacking in structure and consistency, which exacerbated their children's challenges.

For example, one parent said, "How can you expect him to be consistent, if you're not?" The data indicate that parents felt schools failed to read or follow recommendations in signed IEPs; a parent indicated, "If you do not read the child's file, then you are going to automatically assume there is always a problem with the student and that is a problem." Another main concern was

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Figure 2
Cultural Broker Interview Protocol

Please state your name, whether you have a child in special education, and a fun activity or hobby you like to do on your days off? (*Warm up question*)

Think back to when you took on your first advocate role. How did it happen that you became an advocate for African American families? (*Follow-up: Describe situations when African American families needed support?*)

How do you support African American families in advocating for the needs of their child(ren)?

Do you feel there is a need for more support (help or assistance) for parents with school-age children on the autism spectrum in navigating and enhancing parent-school partnerships? If so, what would that look like?

Do you have ideas or suggestions for African American families to gain more power or cultural capital in coming together with SPED case managers, principals, and school district representatives?

Is there anything you would like to add?

Table 3
Theme Representation Across Participants for Research Question 2

Research Question 2: African American parents and role of cultural brokers within parent-school partnerships.

Themes	A&L	Sheri	V&R	Wilma	Lauren	Karen	Sarah	Brenda	Sandy	FG
III. **Empowering experiences**										
Being in the loop	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	O	O
Opportunities for growth	X	X	O	X	X	X	X	X	X	O
IV. **Disempowering experiences**										
Substandard services	X	0	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Communication	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Issues with school district	X	O	X	O	X	X	X	X	X	X

Legend: X = The participant *did* feel their child received substandard services, they experienced tense and disproportionate communication, had issues with their school district since their child became school age, were in the loop (in terms of comunication), and their child's school community offered opportunities for growth.

O = The participant *did not* feel they received substandard services, tense and disproportionate communication, had issues with their school district at any time or their child was not presented with opportunities to grow within their school community.

children's academic and social–emotional needs going unknown by teachers and instructional aides.

Tense and infelicitous communication and/or actions devoid of cultural awareness. The data reveal how several members of participants' school communities failed to communicate with them and/or other African American parents effectively and in a respectful manner. A parent who repeatedly advocated for support in literacy acquisition was in turn scolded by the teacher, who said, "Watch your tone. It's just a bit aggressive, and I feel like you're coming down on me."

Parents revealed accounts of when their words and actions were misinterpreted and misconstrued by members of their school communities. As a result, they described feeling unwelcome and unsupported beyond the gates of their children's academic space. Data also indicate school representatives consistently interacting with parents in culturally unresponsive ways, even when they were provided with training, as in the following example:

Probably the biggest assumption as an African American was that I was violent, and I would do or say something that was uncontrollable. For example, whenever we set a [IEP] meeting where they felt like they were going to tell me something that didn't jive or go with what I was requesting—that was within my rights—they would make sure that the police were there, or some sort of security.

These members of the participants' school community failed to identify and comprehend cultural differences in their African American parents and see them through a strengths-based lens. A broker stated, "We [African American parents] don't feel like they feel for no reason." These data highlight evidence of participants wanting their concerns surrounding cultural disconnect to be recognized and to lead to concrete solutions.

Issues with the school district. Participants described experiences dealing with school district practices as harmful. The data indicate how urgent requests for related services were routinely tabled, stalled, or ignored indefinitely. Participants discussed that it was inferred or explicitly stated that budget constraints drive decisions for granting related services, not eligibility:

I was told that because his classes were mainly speech based, that was another reason we could not get speech therapy outside of the classroom. That still didn't sit well with me. . . . I finally let that go, now the occupational therapy . . . to this day I still ask for it. I am told that it's not a service that the school district pays for.

In addition, the data point to situations when districts refused to provide a crucial service, such as appropriate transportation (shorter routes and properly functioning buses) and one-on-one aides, to children on the autism spectrum who elope.

A parent recalled her trajectory to obtain an aide: "In middle school . . . he would walk away, or he'd have a meltdown or something like that. I was always told that he didn't need a one-on-one until one day [her child] walked off and he was gone." The data indicate participant frustrations as a catalyst for long-standing distrust and tension between families and schools.

Desired Support and the Role of Cultural Brokers Within Parent–School Partnerships

Specifically design help in schools/districts. All participants felt the need for support groups and clubs specific to the culturally unique needs of African Americans. Participant data indicated the need to address ways for families to become equal players in parent–school partnerships. A parent enthusiastically stated, "I think that would help bridge the gap."

Focus group data indicate that the most essential piece in cultivating parent–school partnerships and addressing the systemic problems African American parents regularly encounter is creating momentum for parents to come together with "like-minded" individuals tackling similar challenges in order to compare needs, strategize, and meet with stakeholders. Meeting socially was also important for families' support efforts outside of the education realm.

Participants also discussed benefits of receiving information and resources to better advocate for their children. Parents thought it critical for support for IEP meetings to go beyond training; they wanted to have advocates present in those meetings who could check for understanding and fairness and ensure that their legal rights were not violated.

The data show dislike of the fast pace of meetings and how educational level can impede parent participation: "Some parents read at a second-grade level and don't know how to read the IEP and [remain engaged in] what is going on."

Create measures to improve autism awareness/acceptance. All participants described how it was critical for individuals to gain more knowledge about autism in their school communities. There was an overall belief that if teachers, support staff, administrators, students, and other parents were more informed, they would in turn be more understanding, accepting, and empathetic toward students on the autism spectrum.

A limited number of autism specialists are employed by districts, according to a broker. A parent stated, "I had to help the [general education] teacher. . . . She never had a kid with autism in her class. She was not familiar with the disability; she had no training."

Develop ways to increase representation and trust. Parent and cultural broker data point to the need for representation in school communities. To achieve this, parents desire trusted individuals to be readily available to support their needs. Cultural brokers feel this is "someone on site who they know they can go to, who they trust," whether it was last year's teacher or principal or a team/community liaison.

A parent participant said, "I think it's easier to get these things out if you're talking to somebody that is African American as I am." The data also indicate the importance of African American parents communicating their needs to be better understood in their academic spaces, as a broker articulated:

I feel like a part of what is going to be most critical is to make the needs of parents like us and communities like ours . . . known . . . educating people about what we need and try[ing] to remedy some of the issues that we're dealing with in special education.

Discussion

Autism Awareness

The parent accounts show a deficiency of knowledge about autism characteristics and support needs of children on the autism spectrum. This was noted among the parents themselves, among members of the African American community, and among educators. The lack of knowledge about autism in African American communities

often results in delayed understanding of the child's behavior as being rooted in autism rather than problem behavior (Lovelace et al., 2018).

Parents also described disbelief and outrage when individuals and entities to whom they looked as experts, such as teachers and administrators, lacked awareness about autism and did not have the competencies to educate and care for their children. The participants felt their children on the autism spectrum were often overlooked, singled out due to undesirable behavior, and disproportionately disciplined. They ascribed these inequities to insufficient training among educators combined with prejudice due to the race of their children.

The parents in this study experienced a strong sense of isolation, in part because autism is largely an unfamiliar disability within their communities. These findings echo existing literature that highlighted how African American parents who have children on the autism spectrum can experience multilayered social isolation (Yu, 2017). Using the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to analyze our findings, it can be noted that the parents do not just feel disconnected from people in their microsystems; they also experience isolation within the meso-, exo-, and macrosystems.

They talked about the lack of understanding and support in their extended families. The school community and the autism community are experienced as biased spaces in which parents don't feel welcome, let alone supported. The families also felt disconnected from special education policy and laws. This overwhelming sense of isolation prevents parents from tapping in to the resources and supports they need to get desired outcomes for their children.

It would be beneficial to African American students and their parents if more members of their community were knowledgeable about autism. Many religious spaces are the pillars of their communities; equipping them with information to share with their members is a way to address this need. Other community spaces, such as libraries and community recreation centers, are also ideal forums for autism-centered knowledge sharing.

Parents are also calling for teachers, instructional assistants, and all parties in school communities to gain knowledge and expertise in autism-centered training to become better prepared to educate their children. Providing training that engages the entire school community (i.e., all-school meetings and assemblies) would have the most impact. This could provide an opportunity for removing stigma associated with autism, which in turn promotes and supports inclusion and acceptance of African American students on the autism spectrum.

Navigating School Systems

For all of the parents in this study, navigating the school system for their children on the autism spectrum was mostly a disempowering experience due to the poor quality of services and difficult communication. This led to communication breakdowns and distrust. A persistent narrative among parents and cultural brokers was how much more prepared parents would be to advocate for the needs of their children if they were provided with explicit instruction in every aspect of the IEP process and with information about interventions that could benefit their children. Participants described wanting full access and engagement in meetings, trainings, and any decisions concerning their children in a way that is likely different from current Eurocentric norms that are deeply embedded in educational systems.

Redefining these collaboration spaces to make them more equitable will be essential (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Rossetti et al., 2017). In their research about African American and Latino school partnerships, Cooper et al. (2010) stressed that reforming family–school partnership structures requires questioning the epistemologies that drive them.

They propose Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework as having the potential to fundamentally redefine the practices, relationships, and identities in this communal learning process. Collaborating according to the principles of communities of practice would mean that African American parents and educators together define a *joint enterprise* (a common goal/vision for the child), create mutual engagement (build community together), and develop joint practice (develop local knowledge).

Research by Mortier and her colleagues (2010) showed that parents of students with disabilities and teachers coming together as a community of practice led to appropriate and flexible supports for the students. It also created an open attitude and a space in which all members felt they could have equal input. Communities of practice can change family–school partnerships because of how they (a) provide an alternative to the traditional top-down approach, (b) allow space for uncertainty and trust, (c) close the gap between espoused theory and theory in use about specialized expertise, and (d) dilute the effect of power imbalances and competing priorities among parents and educators (Mortier, 2018).

Trust and Representation

This study confirms that trust and representation are essential in building family–school partnerships and that this is currently lacking for African American parents (Francis et al., 2016; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). As long as parents are in the position of having to assimilate, they cannot become equally valued members. This study indicates how increased representation of African Americans in school communities would make an important difference to African American families.

This is consistent with prior research showing that student success in classrooms increases when teachers represent their own and other multicultural ethnicities (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). Parents and cultural brokers felt a community liaison was the key to addressing the needs of parents in real time and to working toward establishing trust and building bridges to connect African American families to the greater school community.

Opportunities for African American parents to support each other in facilitated support groups are highly recommended. It also is imperative that changes be made in hiring practices to bring more African American individuals into key roles within school systems and that cultural brokers are welcomed as a support for families. Implementing cultural humility training (Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998) could make an important difference to African American parents and children faced with school sites and districts devoid of cultural awareness and competence.

The cultural humility framework is not static: "It is a process that requires humility as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners" (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 118). Cultural humility can be facilitated when parents and educators are engaged as communities of practice.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the small sample size. This shortcoming was due to the narrow reach of recruitment and the small scale of the study. Even if this research provided rich and new data for the field, it cannot be generalized because of the sample size. In addition, participants were all parents of male students. Female students on the autism spectrum who identify as African American potentially have different experiences within general education and special education environments.

Implications for Research

Future research should focus on (a) replicating this study with more African American parents and cultural brokers to test the current findings; (b) studying the perspectives of teachers and school communities about equitable education environments for African American pupils on the autism spectrum and parents; (c) analyzing cultural brokers' involvement with African American families in school systems; and (d) addressing the areas of autism-centered training, African American representation, and the concepts of cultural humility, and increasing parent advocacy.

Conclusion

The importance of this study rests in its inclusion of the unique narratives of African American parents and cultural brokers, providing insights into their experiences with children on the autism spectrum in their communities. It supports an existing body of research that has addressed the underlying complexities of engaging with school systems as a marginalized parent.

This study reiterates the necessity for schools and district staff to improve efforts to build trust, increase representation, and acknowledge the impact of turning a blind eye to inequality and cultural unawareness for this demographic of parents and students. Increasing awareness about autism in the African American community and in schools, involving cultural brokers, creating communities of practice, and practicing cultural humility are ways of ensuring quality and equality for students with autism in educational settings.

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