

Speaking from the Margins: Recounting the Experiences of a Special Educator and his Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

In this first-person narrative, Stewart and Kennedy illustrate the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education.

“African Americans in DPS [Denver Public Schools] are invisible, silenced and dehumanized, especially if you are passionate, vocal and unapologetically black. We can’t even be advocates for our kids” (Bailey, 2016, p. 17). As we read this line from Bailey’s study, we thought, “*Is this David’s story?*” When he left the school district five years ago as a double-certified Special Educator, he shared the same feelings of silencing and dehumanizing discontent. Bailey emphasized a powerful sentiment experienced and mirrored by other Black educators:

I want them to talk to those of us who are living it and hear our stories, our struggles ... and all of us can’t be crazy. You can’t possibly have this level of a common theme ... All of us can’t be making this up. It’s like we’re living mirror stories ... all of us. (p. 20)

What started as a doctoral course assignment of a critical race theoretical narrative, evolved into weeks of interviews, document analysis of district emails and formal statements, corroborated memo notes, and fact-checking. We struggled with how to represent his experiences at the district, as they were not without the residual effects of racial microaggressions, which include feelings of internalized oppression (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007).

These everyday microaggressions were unconscious acts, derogatory behavior, remarks or comments that demean, negate, insult and serve to degrade a person of color. We chose to represent his experiences as a concealed story. Borrowing from Bell’s (2010) use and definition, the concealed story depicts the experiences of the individual and/or collective body that are often repressed and hidden from mainstream

discourse. Specifically, concealed stories “narrate the ways that race differentially shapes life experiences and opportunities, disputing the unblemished tales of color-blindness” (Bell, 2010, p. 43).

This essay is therefore written in the form of a first-person narrative from his work with culturally and linguistically diverse and twice exceptional 2e students. The purpose of this concealed story is tri-fold: (a) to illustrate “the trauma of being dehumanized by racism” (Bell, 2010, p. 45); (b) to shed light on the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education; and (c) to provide strategies for creating an inclusive learning environment, and working with parents especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Harry, 2008). What follows is the story, written in a first person narrative supported by literature, and undergirded by the researchers’ reflexivity.

Prologue

As a newly hired Special Education (SPED) teacher in the Blended Center program, my classroom consisted of students in grades 7 and 8, predominantly comprised of Black and Hispanic students with a range of disabilities. Furthermore, my students qualified for free and reduced lunch, which was representative of the larger school body. The disproportionate or “overrepresentation of Black and sometimes Hispanic American

students in high-incidence categories” (Ford, 2012, p. 398) in special education has long been an issue in the United States (Beratan, 2008; Jordon, 2005), which was reflected in my district.

At the time, I was teaching in a Midwestern, urban school district in which 80% of the student population comprised of students of color, but close to 80% of the teaching population was White. In 2014, the district indicated that students in special education made up 11% of the total student population. Seventeen percent (17%) of the students in special education were White, while the remaining 83% were comprised as follows: Black (31.7%), Hispanic (44.4%), Asian (2.9%) and American Indian (0.6%) (Denver Public Schools, 2013-2014).

The Blended Center program referred to students in special education who were assessed in high incidence categories such as mild mental retardation (MMR), emotional disturbance (ED) and learning disabilities (LD). The practice of the Blended Center program was to keep these students identified as needing “special education services” in a single classroom, which isolated them from the rest of the school. The classrooms were located in the rear of the school directly across from the detention and in-school suspension hall. Without any inclusion classes, the students were expected to remain with me throughout the day with

the exception of lunch, and physical education (P.E.). It seemed like, as long as they remained unseen, out of trouble, then the goals of the program were met.

As a result, not only were the students isolated from the school, but by default, the teachers and the paraprofessionals were also isolated. Before I arrived, many of the other teachers at the school did not know any of the Blended Center students, and had many misconceptions about who they were and what they were capable of (Ford, Coleman & Davis, 2014). There was a debilitating and deficit model of thinking about the students; they were not expected to succeed but to be tracked through the PK-12 pipeline and placed in remedial classes, even if they were gifted (Ford, Marsh, Blakely, & Amos 2014; Lovett & Sparks, 2011).

Students who should have been in a gifted program were never placed, as there were no gifted programs at the school. At our monthly departmental meetings comprised of district administrators and teaching staff, the Special Education “team” wrote the behavioral management and safety plans not for the benefit of the students but for the benefit of the larger school population. Most suggestions I would make as the only Black male special educator and person of color on the team would be dismissed and/or corrected due to the perception they were

outside of the purview of reasonable accommodations.

Teacher referral or lack thereof is fundamentally about expectations, and the expectations of the team were that of minimal standards and perceived through a White normative lens of meritocracy (Ford, 2013). On the SPED team, I was seemingly a token to represent the cultural needs of my students. However, I was baited by constant microaggressions, similar to those identified in McDonald, Keys and Balcazar’s (2007) study.

In the first few weeks of school, after establishing control of the classroom and developing a rapport with the students, I quickly observed that my main challenge would be to reverse the years of self-hatred that they had been subjected to, the lack of confidence that they had attained over the years, and redefining within them a new self-identity, and sense of pride as suggested by Whiting (2006). As I reflect on my students’ experiences, their turning points and key moments of change, I have vivid memories and images of each students’ stories. For the purpose of this essay, I shine light on two of my culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Chapter 1: AJ's Story

AJ was an African American, eighth grader diagnosed with autism. He was one of only two students on the autism spectrum in my class. According to his previous IEP, he was socially awkward, worked best independently and preferred routines. What was not written on the IEP was that AJ was often picked on and bullied by the other students in the class that were assessed with emotional, behavioral and learning disabilities. Interestingly, one particular student who consistently and continuously picked on and bullied AJ was the other student on the autism spectrum.

This particular student directed so much resentment towards him, that on three separate occasions, these attacks became physical. The structure of the Blended Center program was a natural recipe for heightened conflict. Since the students had varying disabilities and were all being housed in one classroom for the majority of the school day, they felt isolated and ostracized from the rest of the school. The *hierarchy* of disabilities became a pseudo divider and constant reflection of differences. Furthermore, the structure lent itself to inadequate accommodations being provided for each student.

Every morning, AJ would be dropped off by one of his parents. AJ looked forward

to the early-morning routine of lining up before entering the class. Whenever he arrived late, he would always ensure that he apologized directly to me for his tardiness, in part because I think he really missed lining up in the morning. Whether late or early, AJ would have his backpack filled with his super heroes and accompanied self-made, comic books. These were not imaginary heroes; these were self-constructed, 3-dimensional, miniature caricatures of super heroes made out of colorful pipe cleaners. There was so much detail and intricate design included, that each superhero would be accompanied by a storyline about their powers, craftily drawn in comic strip formats.

There were never any villains, only heroes. This made me look forward to every homeroom, where I would receive an introduction to another one of AJ's masterpieces. AJ was academically ahead of the class, completing his work before the others, being able to quickly focus on tasks. Upon completion of each task, he would be granted permission to take out his super heroes and/or pipe cleaners to create another episode of his Avenger's saga. In my previous experience as a Special Education teacher in a Southeast urban, predominantly Hispanic and Black school district, I worked in a program that was subdivided by the student's disabilities. For example, there was

a separate classroom for students with autism and students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD). In my role as the EBD teacher, I only had students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Further, we had trained and certified educators that took lead in specific duties such as co-designing safety and behavior management plans. My SPED team was mostly comprised of Black and Hispanic teachers who had close connections to the community, which resulted in the natural inclusion of a more culturally and linguistically diverse curriculum for the students we served. In having this organized, sub-division department, there was a system already in place that facilitated the “mainstreaming” of students into regular classes. It was institutional and systemic so that when students matriculated to high school, they would receive academic support and graduate with a general high school diploma.

There was no inclusion program or mainstreaming practice in my experience in the Midwest. As such, I attempted to recreate my previous experience in the Southeast in the Blended Center program. During the first nine weeks of teaching, I approached several teachers about the possibility of including my students in their classes with the aid of the paraprofessional for support. The development of a cohort system was to

facilitate students being grouped and mainstreamed into a 7th grade science classroom. Additionally, every nine weeks, I rotated the cohorts that were guided by a strengths-based system in several electives such as art, music, and drama.

Based on AJ’s passion for creating caricatures and comic strips, he thrived in both the science and art classes. The science teacher constantly remarked that AJ was one of his most talented and highly motivated students, especially when tasked with completing experiments. The art teacher would also remark about his vivid imagination and attention to detail. The turning point for AJ was his enrolment in drama, as he was socially awkward and worked best independently. However, inside the drama class he surprised both the drama teacher and myself, as he would take on a different persona, similar to that of his superheroes and would often perform skits in front of the whole class. His transition into this new class was surprisingly seamless.

From the start of the school, I thought AJ was being underserved as he was one of two autistic students in a class filled with multi-intensive cases, and he was not receiving optimal services to make him thrive. If he remained in this program, he would be constantly tracked through the Special Education program with little hope of

receiving a general high school diploma. His parents and I started meeting by having casual morning conversations about his development and previous experiences in the school district.

From those casual morning conversations, we started having one-on-one consultations about long term plans to mainstream AJ, and provide better resources even if it meant changing schools or even districts. His parents started to see significant changes in his behavior at home and attitude towards school. He loved being in the elective and science classes, arguably even more than the Blended Center classes.

Chapter 2: JD's Story

JD was a first-generation, Hispanic, 7th grade student assessed with an intellectual or cognitive disability who desperately wanted to fit in with the eighth grade students in my class. He viewed them as the “cool” kids, but unfortunately, they did not hold the same sentiments towards him. The eighth grade students would often bully and pick on him as well, sometimes instructing him to antagonize other students for their own enjoyment. JD would gleefully carry out these instructions. He would do anything to temporarily remove himself from the receiving end of their ridicule, in hopes of finally being truly accepted by them.

AJ was a reoccurring target, and even though JD would regularly pick on him for the entertainment of the eighth grade students, he was also the most empathetic towards AJ. It was a very interesting dynamic, wherein one moment, JD would take AJ's pipe cleaners, and action figure heroes and hide them. Then five minutes later, if those same action figures fell on the floor, he would voluntarily pick them up, and hand them back to AJ.

Something unique about JD was that he had a twin brother who was enrolled in all regular classes. As an English Language Learner, he had extreme difficulties reading English, which greatly impacted his attitude and behavior in the classroom. He would find alternative ways to avoid completing assignments, and exhibit disruptive behavior as a means to seek alternative attention to compensate for his reading aptitude and more so his feelings of inadequacy.

One day after school, instead of going straight to the designated environmental after-school program, JD and another seventh grade student from my SPED class decided to enter a bathroom and light a piece of paper on fire with a barbeque lighter. In an attempt to out the burning paper and throw it in the toilet, they dropped it on the floor, and the two students ran out of the bathroom leaving the smoke to ensue. The smoke from

the burning paper triggered the smoke detector and subsequent alarm. The entire building had to be evacuated and both the police and fire department were dispatched to investigate the incident and eventually clear the building for re-entry. The fire was over before the excitement, as (luckily) the paper burned and completely dissipated.

The next day, after an administrative review of the security cameras, I was informed that the arson incident involved two of my students, and as such, there would be a subsequent need for a modified behavior and safety plan for both of them. Fortunately, this incident occurred early in the school year, and became my turning point for JD. Due to this incident being treated as arson, JD stood to lose much more than his afterschool privileges and freedom of movement. He would be labeled as a ‘threat’ to the school.

The SPED team immediately recommended that he receive constant supervision, be subject to a search every morning before entering the school building, and that all his afterschool privileges be revoked. Initially, I had considered entering JD into an afterschool soccer club, but based on these new turn of events, that was no longer an option. I had to come up with a quick alternative to compensate for his loss during the regular school day.

In his downtime, JD would fidget by drumming beats on the desk and kept a beat with either his hands or number-2 pencils. Knowing that reading was still his main challenge, I started to explore the options in the music elective class. The music class had a 5-piece drum set and a keyboard, among other instruments. JD naturally took to the drums but after a few sessions, the music teacher encouraged him to try the keyboard. In noticing his natural affinity to the instruments, the music teacher introduced JD to the concept of reading music notes. The structure of the music class enabled all students at varying levels to play instruments and learn together as a collective band. JD had become a part of the larger school community. In which, only his twin brother was previously afforded.

The music teacher took an interest in developing JD’s skill. He would work with him outside of music class, even during his planning periods, and as a reward mechanism, I allowed JD to earn extra practice hours. His behavior changed significantly, where his confidence improved and he no longer sought the constant acceptance and attention of the eighth grade students. His attention was focused on music and receiving positive reinforcement from his music teacher and new peers.

Epilogue

The structure of the Blended Center program was designed for teacher failure and burnout. In addition to all that is required of a regular teacher, I was expected to maintain a caseload of students, create individual schedules for students, plan for five core subjects to teach, and then individualize a lesson plan for each student. When it came to discipline, my only option was the dean's office, and there was never consistent supervision, or a designated room for indoor suspension for my students. Often, I would handle my own discipline in-house, which proved to be time-consuming. During electives, my time was spent holding detentions, counseling students, planning, and providing a space for students to calm down and deescalate aggressive behaviors.

Increasingly, it became harder for me to continue to support a program, which likely did more harm than good to the Black and Hispanic students it was intended to serve. Increasingly, the safety and behavior plans seemed to reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline. As a double certified SPED teacher, I was more familiar with effective structures of inclusion in other state districts. To create more inclusive learning environments for my students, the environment needed to go beyond my classroom, it had to be embedded throughout

the school. Providing multicultural competency training to all school personnel (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008) would have benefited not only the SPED team, but also the general teaching staff.

My students' schedules were all changed to reflect a more diverse school day, where they were afforded the opportunity to interact with other general education students, and experience general education classrooms, in hopes of mainstreaming the students. They moved from having five periods per day in the SPED class to mainstreaming two periods in the general classes. During the science class, the incidences of bullying and aggression were significantly reduced among my students, as there was no longer a need for negative reinforcement. The students excelled in the science classroom, and the teacher would often comment on their increased levels of participation in class compared to his other students.

Due to the nature of the number of students with varying multi-intensive disabilities in my class, each student had an individualized lesson plan. The paraprofessional and I would often work with each student on varying subjects and learning activities. To create a more inclusive learning environment, I had the students work in peer groups at different stations with different

activities based on the individual lesson plans. In Language Arts, I asked students to write and read sections of personal narratives, which proved effective. Each student utilized this journaling exercise differently. For AJ, identifying with his feelings was challenging, but he used his superhero stories to illustrate his own lived experiences. JD received individual assistance from either the paraprofessional or myself in order to activate his own voice. Noticeably, when JD had music classes, his writing became more descriptive and expressive.

In Mathematics, I designed a game-show point system, where students rotated between active roles as contestants and audience members. This activity allowed the students to not only demonstrate their understanding and computations in math but also engaged them to work in teams and co-teach the class on solving problems.

It sounds simple, but for each school-wide assembly, I made sure all my students attended. This made them feel a part of the larger school community and not isolated within the SPED classroom. When the school year started, my students ate lunch with the students who were assessed with severe physical and cognitive disabilities. The school's intention was to reduce the risk of bullying to the special education students as well as to safeguard the general students

from students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. However this lunch schedule had an adverse effect on my students who felt further isolated from the school community. By diversifying my students' schedule, I was able to shift their lunch schedule where they could eat with other students in the school. These were simple changes but had major effects on not only shaping an inclusive learning environment, but also my students' confidence and morale.

Quickly, I realized the need to advocate for not only the students but also their parents or guardians indirectly isolated from the school community. As such, I began to conduct home visits in order to complete parent-teacher conferences as well as suggest alternative resources for students such as AJ, who needed to receive services in gifted programs. These efforts began to empower the parents with language about culturally responsive evaluations and the need for culturally sensitive instruments (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). By explaining that there can and should be IEPs better suited for culturally and linguistically diverse students, parents started to develop a sense of agency. As a result, some of the parents started to question the school administration and request specific accommodations in line with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Subsequently, I received an email instructing me that all formal school communication with parents must be done in the presence of senior administration. Additionally, I was told that requesting culturally responsive practices such as “collaborating with parents to demonstrate high expectations” or “integrating cultural capital of Black males into the curriculum” (Robinson, 2016, p. 168) was not feasible.

My final days as a special educator came when the Assistant Principal informed me that she had opened an investigation on me for inadequate supervision of students as a violation of the students’ individual safety plans. As such, I was immediately asked to vacate for three days during the investigation. Prior to this meeting, the White, female Assistant Principal and I had been in repeated conflicts with (a) mainstreaming my students, (b) altering the students’ lunch schedule, (c) refusing to accept and write “school-to-prison” IEPs, and (d) designing and introducing an after-school hip-hop poetry elective class (as an outlet for students to engage with the Arts in Education).

During those three days, I sought legal counsel and union counsel and reached out to key Black community activists in the city. Upon returning to school, I was asked to submit my official statement in response to the investigation. The accusations were

completely false because the room was locked every night, so students could not enter unsupervised. In fact, my students had always been supervised and/or accompanied by a certified teacher and/or paraprofessional. The investigation returned inconclusive, however, because I was a first year teacher in the district, the school did not need a valid reason for non-renewal of my contract during the probationary first year. This essay was born out of that statement I wrote five years ago. I have never returned to the classroom.

Concluding Thoughts

When David left the classroom that year, he left parts of his former identity as well. He left the confidence he once had when he entered a classroom. He internalized feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt as a special educator; questioning every decision he had made, every home-visit, every court visit (to defend his students), and every hospital visit (to support the family of his student who tried to commit suicide rather than accept living with a disability). Research has shown that the effects of microaggressions linger years after the incidences have taken place (Ford, 2014; Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013; Sue et al., 2007) leaving the target feeling isolated, depressed and sometimes crazy.

The timeliness of reading Bailey's (2016) study and observing all the similarities provided in many ways validation for completing this article and documenting it as a concealed story. Throughout Bailey's (2016) study, we found other mirror stories to David's from other special education teachers. Bailey (2016) cites Darling-Hammond's (2010) *Anatomy of Inequality* in education by listing not only the overrepresentation of African American students in special education but also the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted programs (p. 71). Some of these inequalities were explained and illustrated in the students' stories.

Our article also supports Bailey's (2016) point that the district "should incorporate culturally-responsive, evidence-based, socio-emotional programming along with teacher training and inclusion in the curriculum" (p. 13). These are only some of the highlights we hoped to share as a conscious process to (a) undo the residual effects of what happened five years ago, (b) shed light on these students' gifts, and (c) encourage other educators to engage marginalized parents meaningfully and create inclusive learning environments.

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