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Resilient Scholar: A High Achieving African American Male with a Learning Disability

About the Author(s)

Dr. Shawn Robinson focuses on the intersection of race, giftedness, and dyslexia, and brings a wealth of academic experience, training and knowledge about the psychological development of dyslexia. He is very passionate about this research, as he first learned how to read at the age of 18 on an elementary reading level, and understands the hardships students face who has not tapped into their gifts because of their misdiagnosis and inability to read. He is an emerging national speaker, and one of few scholars with a research focus on the scholarship, theory, and literature addressing theoretical or psychological frameworks that investigates twice-exceptional Black males with dyslexia.



RESILIENT SCHOLAR: A HIGH ACHIEVING AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY

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Abstract

The existing literature on race/ethnicity overlooks learning disability (LD) and the latter often neglects African American males. Further, when the intersection of race/ethnicity and LD overlap, African American males are rarely discussed or viewed as high achievers within the literature. Therefore, I seek to break through the wall of silence and provide an account that explores the rich lived experiences of a high achieving African American male with LD (i.e., dyslexia) in higher education. The article begins with literature relevant to my lived experiences followed by contextualizing those experiences as a high achiever. Next, I use a conceptual framework as the foundation of my journey, which leads into my personal vignette. Thereafter, I offer a brief discussion, which is based on the scholarship of Bonner's (2001) phenomenological study. The article ends with recommendations for disability services.

Introduction

If assumptions are to be predictable, the fact that as an African American (AA) male who was in special education, attended an alternative high school for two years, experienced some teachers who had deficit thinking about my academic performance, and graduated high school reading at an elementary level places me in the categories of underprepared and underachiever (Robinson, 2013). Fortunately, I did not fall victim to societal traps that await AA males "warehoused" in special education throughout the American public-school system (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005). I pulled myself out of the bondage of illiteracy and eventually received three degrees: BS in Human Services, an MEd in School Counseling and a Ph.D. in Literacy and Language. Therefore, my analysis uses a critical disability lens as the approach that not only provided me the capacity to self-advocate, but also allowed me to disrupt the misleading labels of AA males with learning disabilities (Robinson, 2018).

Scholars whose educational philosophies are engrained from a Western ideology may continue promoting a specific and biased description of AA males in special education, and it is important for me to disrupt the current stereotypes that society portrays. Thus, writing my personal vignette was inspired by the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* who described climbing towards self-liberation as well as the cultural capital he utilized against public and educational laws and policies that benefited some while disregarding others, and teachers who pushed "students" away from freedom towards subjugation. As an autoethnographer, this piece was written to emphasize my experiences coming from an underachiever to a high achieving AA male with dyslexia as well as inspire and encourage other students who share similar experiences. This approach provides a stark contrast from a sizable amount of literature which continues to describe this population's learning from a deficit perspective, silencing their stories of triumph and hardships (Banks & Hughes, 2013; Davis & Palmer, 2010).

Literature Related to my Lived Experiences

The literature on the experiences of high achieving AA males with dyslexia is limited, and before moving forward, it is essential to provide working definitions that are interwoven throughout my vignette.

Dyslexia. Lyon, Shaywitz, and Shaywitz (2003) capture the essence of this reading disorder, a specific learning disability:

that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experiences that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (p. 2).

Resistant Capital (resiliency). According to Yosso (2005), resistant capital is “knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior(s) that challenges inequality” (p. 80). In addition, when considering a student’s resiliency, it is important to acknowledge the scholarship of Bonner’s (2014) edited volume titled “*Building on Resilience: Models and Frameworks of Black Male Success Across the P-20 Pipeline.*” His edited book is a comprehensive text on AA male students and their academic success through the PreK-20 educational system, which has implications for understanding high achievers with learning disabilities.

Gifted. The National Society for the Gifted and Talented (NSGT, 2017) defined giftedness as:

all areas of a child's life: academic, artistic, athletic, and social. Most schools limit their definition and their programs to academics, but it is important to focus on performance and accomplishment. It is not enough to just have the talent; you must be using that talent to achieve at remarkably high levels. However, this definition does also recognize that while all very talented students have the potential to achieve at high levels, some may not have yet realized or demonstrated that potential. Such students may be underachievers, twice exceptional, or represent underserved groups who have not had a nurturing environment to bring out those talents. Finally, this definition is a comparative one; these students achieve or have the potential to achieve at levels way above their peers (para. 1).

In Bonner’s (2001) phenomenological study of AA college students, he discovered the following themes: (a) relationships with faculty, (b) peer relationships, (c) family influence and support, (d) factors influencing college selection, (e) self-perception, and (f) institutional environment as instrumental to student success. All of these factors were also fundamental to my own post-secondary experiences, which are interwoven throughout my vignette and thereafter. Moreover, it is important to note that students who are identified as gifted can exhibit traits of a high achiever, which can include but are not limited to the following characteristics: show interests, work hard to achieve a goal, and able (Kingore, 2004). Student’s having knowledge of the combinations of those definitions may help them understand their learning styles in an effort to reach their full capabilities, as well as help them utilize their resistant capital by adapting to their academic environments to succeed.

Contextualizing My Experience as a High Achiever with Dyslexia in Higher Education

The academic matriculation of students with disabilities across postsecondary campuses is on the increase (Newman et al. 2010) as key legislation policies (i.e., Americans with

Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008) have caused for proper examination on the accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities (Snyder & Dillow 2015). Yet, one group that is under-examined in the research literature are high achieving AA males identified with learning disabilities. Fries-Britt (1997) asserted that the literature on AA students has disproportionately concentrated on academic underachievement within the Prek-20 American educational system.

Fries-Britt (2000) noted the literature on AA males exhibiting the characteristics of a high achiever has been neglected. Therefore, it is critical to explore their needs, challenges, and the problems students encountered at the post-secondary level. Almost 20 years later, AA males continue to face many socio-cultural, scholastic, and destructive stressors that may create taxing experiences and identity conflicts (Bridges, 2011). Further, Fries-Britt (2002) asserted that society knows very little about high achievers within the AA college student's population as the literature is based on a deficit perspective of those who are identified as underachievers. However, my argument is that AA students who become pigeon-holed with an apparent learning disability also camouflage their ability, and feel they have to prove themselves. With effective academic support services, these students can succeed at the highest academic levels (Robinson, 2015a).

To better understand this population within the contexts of high achievers, educators should know: who are these students, how are their college experiences different, and what are their areas of academic weaknesses and strengths? Along similar lines, it is extremely critical to learn what strategies these students utilized to (1) beat the odds and (2) make the most of their colligate journeys? By understanding their lived experiences, educators are equipped with knowledge of how to best academically and socially serve AA males with dyslexia at the collegiate level (Davis & Robinson, 2018). Framing high achieving students learning from multi-dimensional theories may assist educators to understand their students' internal and external sources of motivation when faced with academic and social challenges (Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2008; 2007; 2005).

Furthermore, an important aspect of acknowledging the student's identity is that educators will discover their resiliency – what contributes to their achievement – in higher education (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Another key factor in a student's resilient nature is the idea of “grit,” which “is positively related to college grades for [AA] males and that background traits, academic factors and grit explain 24 % of the variance in [AA] male's college grades” (Strayhorn, 2013; p. 1). Thus, in the next section, I used critical disability theory to contextualize my experience as a high achieving AA male with dyslexia.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Disability Theory

My personal vignette utilizes a critical disability theory approach that not only examines my academic experiences but also explores how students with invisible disabilities face many challenges when applying for and utilizing academic services that can help them succeed (Reid & Knight, 2006). When race is factored in, AA students, particularly males, continued to be “marginalized” and the existence of their disabilities are barely acknowledged, overlooked, or dismissed by some educators (Blanchett, 2010).

Thus, this marginalization contributes to the social construction of their academic identities (Robinson, 2017). Scholars utilizing critical disability studies consider a student's disability as a social construct, which empowers and offers students access to academic equality, which has the potential to improve their quality of life (Ferri, 2006). However, if teachers do not

acknowledge dyslexia as a cultural identity, students of color will continue to be tracked into other disability categories, disregarded as a subculture, invisible, and voiceless (Robinson, 2016a).

In summary, to confront specific and biased descriptions of AA males with learning disabilities within the academic system, utilizing critical disability theory allowed me to discuss my abilities from a strength-based perspective. My work addresses academic inequalities from a social justice perspective, and my personal vignette afforded me a safe place to theorize my experiences as well as a vehicle to move forward in having my voice heard.

Personal Vignette:

The Making of a High Achieving and Resilient Scholar

Feeling like an “other” at a predominately White institution. Before writing my personal vignette, it is critical to reflect upon the postsecondary enrollment at the university I attended. The demographic breakdowns of AA and White between 1996-2002 are in chronological order and are disproportionate (see table 1). Prior to college and thereafter, society did not offer me the status and cultural capital my mother had obtained being a White woman with a Master's degree. I was seen as an "other," felt invisible, and responded to how I was treated by members of different communities. For instance, navigating a predominately White campus/space as a bi-racial male, I was treated as an AA by faculty who possessed deficit thinking about my academic performance. More importantly than my race, was my disability status, as I wanted to be accepted in an academic space that is not always “welcoming” and “supportive” to students with learning disabilities. In my case, I had an environment that helped me feel visible.

The first time I realized or demonstrated my full academic potential. I start my vignette with a quote from Frederick Douglass, which speaks to my journey “Without Struggle There Is No Success.” In the summer of 1996, I enrolled in the university's pre-college program for students with dyslexia, which included about 55 other peers with dyslexia. There were only two AA males in the cohort of 55 students, but eventually, only I remained as the other student did not utilize the program. For the first time, I began to experience academic success. Reflecting back, no student graduating from high school should have reading scores at an elementary level, but given my experiences and resilient nature, those scores were a starting point for me.

The summer program involved taking a remedial reading and writing course, but unfortunately, I was discouraged because of my past PreK-12 experiences. My fear was not accompanied by an ability to properly communicate emotions and in one specific course, an upperclassman tutor pulled me to the side and said, “Look, I see right through your attitude. I have worked way too hard and won't let you ruin it for others. So, either get it together or go home.” My realization was this person truly cared and wanted to help me, which enabled me to slowly drop the curtain of fear and negativity. In my first two courses, I received an A and a B, and my confidence started to grow. Dr. Kitz, my undergraduate professor stated:

I have known Shawn since he entered UW Oshkosh as a student in Project Success of 1996. At first, I felt Shawn did not want to be in school and that possibly [his mom was more interested in having him attend college than he was]. However, during our summer program, Shawn worked hard and managed to earn very good grades in our five credits of summer coursework, despite the fact he was one of the most disabled reader/spellers in the group.

After learning about linguistics, the sound structure of the American English language and learning to read, and then being equipped with knowledge about dyslexia, I became voracious in my quest for knowledge, which became the central characteristic of my academic journey. During the summer months and thereafter, I received instruction using Pure and Complete Phonics (PCP; Nash, 2015), a remedial intervention that was used to correct the language deficits of dyslexia. The curriculum employs the approach of direct and explicit instruction, which helped me learn to decode and identify words accurately and fluently. For example, the word *lugubrious* in the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (M-WCD) 11th edition (2009) on page 739 is written out twice, in both bold and regular print.

Bold Print

Lu-gu-bri-ous

Regular print

\lŭ-gü-brĕ- əs\

The latter identifies the phonetic assignment of a given letter. The sound of each letter or letter team is identified in the pronunciation of the word given at the right. For example, the letter *L* makes the sound of /l/ and the letter *u* makes the sound of /ü/ as in the word “good”, and this syllable is an open syllable (O.S.) because it does not have a consonant to the right of an isolated vowel within the syllable. The letter *g* makes the sound of /g/ and letter *u* is represented by the sound of /ü/ as in the word “lieutenant”, and this is also an O.S. The next two letters *b* and *r* have the sounds of /b/ and /r/ respectively, but the letter *i* is identified by the sound of the long /ē/ as in the word “me”. The letters *bri* are also an O.S. In the last syllable, the letters *ou* are identified by the sound of /ə/ as in the word “up” and the letter *s* makes its most common sound /s/. The last syllable is a Vowel Team Syllable because it contains two or more vowels with one sound within the syllable.

When pronouncing the word *lugubrious*, the high-set mark is before the phonetic assignment of *gü* in the second syllable, which indicates the strongest stress or accent. Thus, the above example demonstrates how the phonetic assignments of a given letter are identified and how the three-syllable word is to be pronounced from left to right. Once students have mastered the sound structure of the American English language and no longer require explicit instruction, they can focus on content and meaning of words stored in their lexicon (Wolf, 2007).

In addition to offering in-depth instruction in reading and spelling at the phoneme-grapheme level, the program offered academic support with the goal of increasing students' competence and helping them become independent learners. I also received individual subject area tutoring and ongoing remedial instruction in written language; however, for me, there was a lack of focus on improving my writing ability because my low reading ability required extensive phonics instruction.

Another aspect of the program was the peer tutor component, which was very beneficial for me. I was assigned to an upper classmate who met with me on a weekly basis to go over current course requirements, time management, and other issues critical for freshman survival. Further, the mentor helped me navigate and cope with my first year of college and encouraged me to fully participate in campus workshops that covered topics such as test-taking strategies and writing skills. Overall, after unlocking the code of the American English language and learning effective comprehension strategies, I could begin applying those higher-level skills needed in the content areas. By utilizing the services provided to me and putting in extra time for study throughout my freshman year, during the fall of 1996, I earned a term Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2.83. Fast Forwarding, in 1998 at the age of twenty, I was tested again using the same formal assessment and subtests, this time administered by Mr. Urbas, who noted:

Shawn was a willing and cooperative subject who still has some habits that inhibit his reading, and some skill areas that are significantly delayed. The habits include such things as guessing from context and omitting suffixes, changing tenses and skipping letters. These suggest that he needs practice in sustained focusing on the letter components of each word before he moves to the next. This will decrease his rate of reading for a time, but quality and accuracy should improve and then the rate will increase.

Reflecting on all my formal assessments, I was driven to succeed in reaching a level of critical consciousness, which occurred after learning how to read. This was demonstrated by my willingness and cooperativeness relative to taking formal tests. My drive to succeed persisted despite possessing a reading deficit. The results of the formal assessment scores from the Woodcock-Johnson-R were divided into two different categories and no standard scores were reported. For instance, for letter-word identification my age equivalent score was 12-0 and my grade equivalent was 6.7. Further, my word attack age equivalent score was 8-4 and my grade equivalent score was 2.8.

The interpretation of the subtests indicated that I continued to have significant delays in basic skills achievement. Two years later I retested, and the interpretation for my Word Attack scores was:

Shawn scored 28 words correct on this subtest, which is an improvement over his 1998 score but is still very low with a grade equivalent of only 3.7. His reading rate during this test was slightly more consistent than on the word identification subtest and though he continued to work at sounding out the target words, he was visibly frustrated by the task. Again, I retested and the interpretation for my Word Identification resulted in the following analysis:

Shawn scored 84 words correct on this test, which placed him at the 8.1-grade level and in the 13th percentile overall. His rate throughout this test was inconsistent and he worked hard to sound out unfamiliar words. His present score indicates a slight improvement over his 6.7 grade equivalent in 1998.

My resiliency was a major factor in me making gains on my tests over the years. Again, after being provided the tools needed to succeed academically, I continued to push hard. Despite not making tremendous gains, I was very satisfied with the progress made. Thus, being accepted into the pre-college program and the university was the start of my scholarly journey, as my experiences helped me become resilient in my quest for social justice. After becoming liberated and understanding my true potential, I was determined to prevent other AA males in special education from experiencing similar situations. For example, the pre-college program provided me the self-confidence needed to navigate college both academically and psychologically by being exposed to three types of enrichment programs (Robinson, 2015b). According to Dr. Kitz, what these enrichment programs did for me as a college student was to help me learn about two brand new areas: dyslexia and remediation. He stated:

You were never exposed to this content before, so you learned about dyslexia by learning facts including the history of dyslexia, medical aspects, social aspects, etc. In addition to the knowledge base you gained in dyslexia, you also gained skills using the Simultaneous Multi-Sensory Instructional Procedure (SMSIP) system of instruction. You applied those skills to help yourself and then you used your social skills to help others. You also did presentations with Dr. Nash and me at conferences where you demonstrated SMSIP, spoke to parents, students and teachers about your journey living with dyslexia and the

experiences that shaped you. In these areas, you took leadership positions and slowly evolved from being a student to a teacher and mentor. These experiences shaped and helped you develop from an angry young adolescent to an articulate man who could advocate for others and yourself. Once you comprehended the material at the undergraduate, graduate and Ph.D. levels you always had the desire to help pass along knowledge to those less fortunate in an effort to help them pull themselves up from the strong grip of illiteracy.

In fact, throughout my academic journey as an undergraduate, I was exposed to a variety of speaking opportunities about my experience. Overall, the knowledge gained from those experiences helped me navigate and survive the academic system. In 2002, at the age of 24, I graduated from college and had come far compared to where I started. In conclusion, the following sections use Bonner's (2001) analysis to examine my lived experiences as a high achieving AA male with dyslexia at the collegiate level.

Discussion

Based on Bonner's (2001) phenomenological study and the themes he discovered: (a) relationships with faculty, (b) peer relationships, (c) family influence and support, (d) factors influencing college selection, (e) self-perception, and (f) institutional environment, I will briefly discuss them in the contexts of my personal vignette (see table 2). In summary, when reflecting on the themes and how they connected with my academic journey I might have just received a college degree but would have been forever dependent on others and technology. I would never have felt good about my skills, and it is my firm belief that the combination of all the themes as well as individuals pushing me within a demanding environment nurtured me into becoming a high achiever.

Recommendations for Disability Services

For many students with dyslexia, college can be overwhelming, and few may consider themselves high achievers. However, there are a variety of "best practices" Student Affairs practitioners within Disability Services can offer in their efforts to meet the needs of undergraduates with dyslexia:

1. Provide individualized and group instruction in language and literacy to enable students to be successful in developmental and college-level coursework;
2. Assist with intrusive retention programs and services that support student retention;
3. Co-facilitate diversity-related workshops to students, faculty, and staff on not only the identification and programming for high achievers, but also on the intersectionality of high achieving, race, and dyslexia;
4. Support students with marginalized identities through the implementation and assessment of equitable and inclusion themed program initiatives.

Furthermore, when supporting this population, it is critical that student affairs practitioners understand the characteristics of students, which includes but are not limited to:

1. Passion and drive inspire others.
2. Never satisfied with their achievements.
3. Live for the challenge.
4. Never admit defeat.
5. Have a chip on their shoulder.

Moreover, faculty and staff need to accurately assess the basic skills of African American males with dyslexia coming out of high school, especially those whose ACT/SAT scores show great disparity with their Grade Point Average. Many of these students work very hard and may

have received high grades because of low expectations – less rigorous curriculum. Overall, Offices of Disability Services may consider a Prek-12 partnership that helps school districts identify students (AA males) earlier so teachers are not only focusing on accommodations but also helping students improve their academic skills. Addressing their needs from a holistic approach can assist African American males with dyslexia to reach their full potential as well as become academically independent in and out of the classroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, assumptions regarding African American males with dyslexia who have received special education services as not being high achievers contribute to a false narrative. The purpose of the article was not only to break through the wall of silence and provide an account that explored the lived experiences of a high achieving AA male with dyslexia but also raise awareness of the characteristics a high achiever demonstrates. For instance, in my case, I had a passion and drive to pull myself out of the bondage of illiteracy. I was never satisfied with my achievements in reading and lived for all academic challenges. Most importantly, I never gave up, and my motivation stemmed from having a chip on my shoulder – prove people wrong. I agree with Bonner's (2001) analysis, as his themes are not only fundamental to my own post-secondary experiences can serve to offer a richer understanding of students with learning disabilities. Thus, I used critical disability theory to write my personal vignette, which focused on my "abilities." Overall, my personal vignette cannot be generalized, but it serves to provide a deeper understanding of a population who has been historically overlooked in the scholarly literature (Robinson, 2013; 2017a/b).

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Table 1. The University of Wisconsin System
Bachelor's Degrees Conferred July 1 through June 30

Degree Level and Black and White				
Bachelor's degrees granted	Black	White	Bachelors total	Graduated
1996-97	19	1,387	1,467	Approximately 1 Black student for every 73 White students
1997-98	9	1,346	1,405	Approximately 1 Black student for every 150 White students
1998-99	9	1,302	1,367	Approximately 1 Black student for every 145 White students
1999-00	13	1,295	1,368	Approximately 1 Black student for every 100 White students
2000-01	13	1,281	1,346	Approximately 1 Black student for every 99 White students
2001-02	13	1,300	1,359	Approximately 1 Black student for every 100 White students

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Table 2: Themes from Bonner's (2001) phenomenological study	
Themes	Personal Vignette/My Experiences
"Peer relationships may expose students to a social network of other achievement-oriented peers, thereby generating and reinforcing higher aspirations and goals (p. 21).	"Look, I see right through your attitude. I have worked way too hard and won't let you ruin it for others. So either get it together or go home."
Family influence and support (Robinson, 2017b).	While most of my familial capital came from my mother, I also realized that my "kinship ties" allowed me to learn the importance of maintaining nourishing acquaintances outside my family. Examples of this expansion of my "kinship ties" were the sense of community I found as a college student.
Factors influencing college selection: Programming to meet the needs of a diverse student body should be the goal of all student affairs divisions (p. 22).	First, it was the only university that accepted me as my academic performance was low. Second, based on my academic needs, the Project Success at the time was considered one of only a handful of schools nationwide that focused on <i>remedial instruction</i> rather than a <i>tutorial</i> assistance program.
Self-perception is "...part of the educational experience, beyond learning, should promote growth and development." (p. 24).	The faculty, staff, and peers not only provided me with a venue to voice my academic concerns and frustrations but also taught me strategies I could employ to reduce the impact of my dyslexia. I began to see myself differently as a student – a scholar.
Institutional environment	My environment accepted me for who I was, did not make judgments about my "isms", and did not settle for just accommodating me. Dr. Nash along with others pushed me to learn the essential academic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic).