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J. Connelly, *Metropolitan State University of Denver*

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Review of: Untold narratives: African Americans who received special education services and succeeded beyond expectations

Jeanne Connelly

Metropolitan State University at Denver

This is an overview and honest review of the 154-page, paperback edition of Untold Narratives: African Americans Who Received Special Education Services and Succeeded Beyond Expectation, edited by Shawn Anthony Robinson.

Keywords: Book Review | African Americans | Special Education | Counternarratives

Shawn Robinson has compiled a powerful collection of *Untold Narratives* that disrupt the “normalcy of low expectations” (Ewell, p. 55) for African American (AA) children within US schools and institutions of higher education. *Untold Narratives* argues that the challenges facing African American students who are identified as disabled stem from historical “racist and hegemonic policies and practices” (Robinson, 2018, p. ix). This book is for everyone in education. Aaliyah Baker’s foreword states that the book is for everyone in education, and intends to detail concrete experiences of special education, rather than perpetuate the socially constructed and idealized policies of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In the first chapter, Jody Fields and Kristie Roberts-Lewis’ thorough history of educational policy and special education services in the US connects IDEA to the broader critical disability rights discourse.

These counterstories, outlining resistance to institutional oppression (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013), are told from African American women and men placed into special education services spanning the decades of the 1970’s to the 2000’s. They reveal schooling experiences that have not significantly changed for African American children with disabilities over time. Rural, urban, and suburban schools are represented, as well as early schooling through higher education. African American children and adults who have been labeled as learning disabled, visually impaired, emotionally disturbed, deaf and hard of hearing demonstrate the difference between a physical or mental impairment and disabling conditions in society with these *Untold Narratives*. In the second narrative within the collection, Saran Stewart and David Kennedy (2018), in setting the stage for these narratives, explicitly name the “structural insurgencies of White interest convergence” (p. 25) within special education policy and practice. Structural harms, such as tracking African American students into remedial courses, segregation through identification, and hyper-surveillance of African American students who have been identified as disabled exemplify how White interest convergence is operationalized through special education policy.

The experiences of African American women, especially those who have been disabled within schools, are sorely lacking within educational discourse (Annamma, 2018). In the third section of the book, *Untold Narratives* includes three counterstories of resilience and success from Danyelle Cerillo, Aunye Boone, and Oluwakemi Elufide. Resilience, from Masten and Barnes (2018) refers to:

The capacity available at a given time in a given context that can be drawn upon to respond to current or future challenges through many different process and connections. Resiliency is not a trait. Supportive relationships play an enormous role in resilience across the lifespan. (p. 2)

Untold Narratives includes examples and nonexamples of supportive relationships and processes within the educational setting.

Cerillo outlines college life as an African American woman who identifies as blind, with positive experiences and struggles to get legal accommodations in each of her classes. Following college, she worked at organizations serving people without sight. Boone, who lives with hearing loss, has become an actor, advocate, and educator, working with people who also have hearing loss. Elufide’s story addresses her diagnoses of ADHD and Learning Disabilities in her early schooling: the label, her understanding, the transition, re-evaluation, the aftermath, and the recovery. She developed Carnegie Writers Incorporated, which combined her skills of mentoring, tutoring, and management to assist people who request support for writing, editing and publishing.

The value of narratives to a broad range of readers is profound. Narratives that provide critical hope, told within a transformative framework, have the potential to expand understanding for education policymakers, scholars, and practitioners. Furthermore, counterstories may launch a call to action. As Robinson states, the authors want to encourage the next generation of African American students and others who are disabled by educational structures; the narratives are written in accessible language for young adults. The book concludes by describing critical literacy practices aligned with Yosso’s Cultural Wealth model (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, this chapter supports teachers serving students who are marginalized by systems such as special education. Constructing narratives related to six forms of capital empowers the storytellers and may improve academic outcomes of a “group that has been neglected” (Robinson, 2018, p. 117) in research and practice for far too long. African Americans who identify and describe their familial, aspirational, social, linguistic, resistance, and navigational capital are better positioned to maneuver within systems of inequity.

While a surface reading of these narratives may lend itself to the White centric grit-and-perseverance description of African American students with disabilities overcoming the odds, that does not do justice to the lived experiences of the storytellers. By connecting the narratives to special education policy and Critical Race Theory, readers are challenged to look at the systems of oppression, rather than individual exceptionalism. Extending the Critical Race framing of these narratives to include Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) work from Annamma et al. (2018) would be beneficial; intersection of race and disability is explicitly named within DisCrit. Furthermore, DisCrit provides a lens for interrogating the social construction of disability as well as race. An example of this scholarship is Annamma’s (2018) *The pedagogy of pathologization: Dis/abled girls of color in the school-prison nexus*, which would pair nicely with Untold Narratives to center the strengths, assets, and resistance strategies of African American children and adults who are navigating systems of oppression. While the authors separated the chapters into gender identities, they didn’t fully explicate the intersectionality for Black women identified with disabilities.

These counterstories illuminate the deficit mindset within special education, which serves the racialization of disability and enables de facto resegregation of African American children. As Fields and Roberts-Lewis remind us, the “tenacity of advocacy groups, parents, and others to ensure a level playing field [for students identified as disabled]” (p.15) has resulted in revisions

to policy and new regulations; however, the expectations of the adults implementing policy continue to impact the success of African American students. Therefore, books such as *Untold Narratives* have an important place in the discourse of special education, and in transforming education in general. As the editor states, this book is for practitioners, teacher educators, students and critical scholars. May it be a rallying cry for each of us to disturb the deficit narratives forwarded by the racialization of disabilities (Annamma et al., 2018).

Author Note

Jeanne Connelly received her doctorate in May 2021 from Iowa State University, where she also completed a Social Justice certificate. Currently, she is an assistant professor of special education at Metropolitan State University of Denver. She is working with pre-service and in-service teachers working towards undergraduate and graduate degrees.

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