

Conquering the Stigma of Special Education Among Black and Brown Boys

By William Shelton

Abstract

The stigma that Black and Brown boys in special education (SPED) face has contributed to a lack of knowledge, support, and proper services that can improve these students' lives. Through building relationships with students and families and honoring students' experiences, we can both conquer this stigma and get our students the high-quality education they deserve.

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On Tuesday, October 27th, I awoke to the sound of police sirens and helicopters hovering above the skies of West Philadelphia. I checked my phone and saw a message from a friend saying, "It's happening again." Police killed another Black man, and riots erupted on 52nd Street, two blocks from my home. Walter Wallace Jr., a 27-year-old man, struggling with mental illness, was killed after refusing to drop a knife. After further research, I learned that Walter Wallace spent many of his school years in special education (SPED).

Over nearly a decade as an educator, I have witnessed Black and Brown boys continuously placed into SPED without sufficient consideration for the student's educational experience. Furthermore, as a former SPED student, I know firsthand the benefits and consequences of being a part of a SPED program.

Special education services are essential for students with learning disabilities. These services include one-on-one learning, group sessions, modified assignments and assessments, and extended time for assignments and assessments. When implemented correctly, these services allow students to excel and reach their potential. However, when Black and Brown boys are placed in SPED programs that are not a good fit for them, it denies them the learning experience they deserve.

Black and Brown boys are labeled with learning disabilities at a higher rate than their white counterparts. In 2016, 12 percent of Black children across the nation received services at school for disabilities ranging from emotional disturbances to physical disabilities to intellectual impairment.^{1,2} Only 8.5 percent of white children received those services.³ According to Paul Morgan, a professor of education at Pennsylvania State University, "Black children are disproportionately poor and often grow up in communities without good access to healthcare, which can increase the risk of having a disability."⁴ Due to this healthcare disparity, Black and Brown children can enter school with misdiagnosed and undiagnosed physical, emotional, or cognitive disabilities. In addition, according to Morgan, even after controlling for several other variables, a Black child is more likely to be identified for a disability than a white child.⁵ These factors come together to result in Black and Brown boys being placed in SPED programs that are not the right fit for them and undermine their educational experiences, their self-worth, and their futures.

I used to cringe every time my SPED teacher came to get me from the classroom in front of my friends. I felt like all the attention was on me and I was not worthy of learning alongside my peers. So, I would invent excuses to avoid going to the SPED classroom. As an educator, I

have seen similar behavior in my students. While teaching seventh and eighth grade English, I had a student who struggled with accepting his SPED accommodations and modifications. He would not attend his pullouts with his SPED teacher or do his modified assignments.^{6,7} This resulted in the student failing multiple assignments. The SPED teacher and I knew the only way to overcome this challenge was to build a trusting relationship with the student.

Building relationships with Black and Brown boys is critical because it humanizes us, helping promote a positive learning community. It is even more important for SPED students. Trusting relationships are essential in supporting both their academic and emotional development. We, as educators, must nurture and uplift them by actively listening and encouraging them.

The SPED teacher and I met with the student during lunch. The lunch meeting was an excellent opportunity for us to get to know him. During the meeting, we first talked about how his day was going. This led to a discussion about his favorite subject (math) and his love of football. We also learned that he felt embarrassed to be in SPED because his friends made fun of him for it.

The SPED teacher and I committed to helping the student overcome this hurdle. Instead of the SPED teacher meeting the student inside my classroom for pullouts, we coordinated over text message, and I sent the student to the SPED classroom with a note. The process worked perfectly, and the student always went straight to the SPED classroom. I also had a discussion with my students after school about bullying and respecting everyone's differences.

Furthermore, SPED programs must move from solely focusing on students' deficits to concentrating on their strengths. Acknowledging and affirming Black and Brown boys' academic and non-academic strengths is key to defeating the stigma facing Black and Brown boys in SPED. While co-teaching a 9th grade SPED English class, many of the students struggled to comprehend grade-appropriate text. Instead of solely focusing on their academic deficits, I focused on their strengths to improve their ability to read and understand.

That group of students was very creative and imaginative with lots of energy and determination. We integrated art, poetry, and music to enhance their learning and engagement. For example, when they were reading *The Odyssey*, I placed passages from the book accompanied by artwork all around the classroom. Students did a gallery walk around the room and connected the artwork with the written text, improving their comprehension abilities. This simple approach to acknowledging and affirming their strengths enabled them to have a meaningful learning experience.

Students and their families play an essential role in removing the stigma of SPED in communities of color and need to be centered—and listened to—throughout students' educations. SPED departments should facilitate workshops about special education on diagnosis, policies, implementation, and other related topics—and they should be given the resources to do so effectively. Many caretakers of students in SPED have limited knowledge about these programs. We must educate caretakers so they can make the best decision for their children. Furthermore, students and families must be part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. Too often, the IEP is created and implemented without feedback and input from the two most important parties: the parents and students. SPED departments should require students to attend their IEP meetings and allow them the opportunity to provide constructive feedback and input in their services. SPED teachers should also be in regular communication with students' caretakers with updates regarding students' progress.

During an eighth-grade IEP meeting, a student realized he no longer needed to be pulled out of the classroom for one-on-one tutoring, as he had earned all As and Bs for two years straight. Instead of dismissing his opinion and experience, the SPED teacher listened and trusted the student. As a result, the SPED teacher decided to reduce the number of pullouts as long as the student completed all his assignments and maintained his GPA. This plan was rooted in the relationship the SPED teacher had with the student.

This example and countless others show why we must give more attention to the intersectional experience of being a Black or Brown boy with special needs. The unique reality these students experience means they have a lot to offer, and we owe it to ourselves and our students to support them in reaching their potential. Walter Wallace's death showed us how not to respond to an individual with mental illness. His legacy can be a catalyst for change in the Black Lives Matter movement—and the movement to destigmatize SPED programs and get all Black and Brown boys a high-quality education that prepares them for a bright future.

End Notes

¹ Emotional disturbances can include the inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors or the inappropriate types of behavior or feelings displayed in normal situations. Physical disabilities can include any condition that can affect someone's ability to move or their stamina. Finally, intellectual impairment includes disabilities that impact someone's ability to learn, problem solve and make proper judgements.

² Jill Barshay, "New studies challenge the claim that black students are sent to special ed too much," The Hechinger Report, August 19, 2019, <https://hechingerreport.org/new-studies-challenge-the-claim-that-black-students-are-sent-to-special-ed-too-much>.

³ Jill Barshay, "New studies challenge."

⁴ Jill Barshay, "New studies challenge."

⁵ Jill Barshay, "New studies challenge."

⁶ Pullouts allow students to meet with their SPED teacher one-on-one or in small groups.

⁷ Modified work can include work that has fewer questions to answer or questions rewritten at the student's reading level.

Bibliography

Barshay, Jill. "New studies challenge the claim that black students are sent to special ed too much." The Hechinger Report. August 19th, 2019. <https://hechingerreport.org/new-studies-challenge-the-claim-that-black-students-are-sent-to-special-ed-too-much>.

About the Author

William Shelton is a life-long educator and community activist. In addition to teaching middle school, William is a professor at Saint Joseph's University Department of Teacher Education. He is also a doctoral student at The Graduate Center at CUNY, where he is pursuing a Ph.D. in Urban Education. William's research focuses on improving literacy in Black and Brown communities, focusing on young men of color and creating policies that disrupt systematic oppression.