



**Presents**

**OVERCOMING OBSTACLES: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS WITH  
DISABILITIES ACHIEVING ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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## **Message from the AFRICAN AMERICAN SUCCESS FOUNDATION**

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

It is our pleasure to provide you with a copy of our latest research that identifies contributors to African American success. You may know that there is a dearth of information that documents the attitudes and behaviors of African Americans who are *excelling* in various endeavors. Historically, well-meaning individuals and organizations have supported studies that they hope will “fix” the problems of African Americans by investigating the root causes of failures and proposing strategies to prevent these problems in the future. The **AFRICAN AMERICAN SUCCESS FOUNDATION (AASF)** believes there is another way to do this.

Founded in 1997, **AASF** is a 501 (c) (3), not-for-profit tax-exempt organization whose mission is to promote the positive image of African Americans. **AASF** is dedicated to the collection and dissemination of information regarding African American achievements. Our goals are to aid in the replication of those successes and to ensure their accurate portrayal in the global community. Our activities include:

- **Information clearinghouse** — Providing the public with information about the diverse and broad-based achievements of African Americans.
- **Scientific research/think tank** — Identifying the attitudes and behaviors that make African Americans successful.
- **Charitable support** — Using Black philanthropy to encourage graduate students and professionals to build the science of success by studying African American success issues.

**AASF** provides grants to support research that studies attitudes and behaviors that contribute to high academic achievement and professional accomplishments by African Americans. By documenting the success of high achievers, social scientists and policy makers have the tools to implement private initiatives and government programs that foster high achievement and positive outcomes.

The following report, *Overcoming Obstacles: African American Students with Disabilities Achieving Academic Success*, examines how two students with disabilities attained GPA's of 3.2 and 3.72 as a result of three key themes: (a) expectations, (b) support, and (c) organization

**AASF** is proud to support this research and looks forward to providing future scientific reports that add to our understanding of African American success.

We look forward to your support of the goals of the **AFRICAN AMERICAN SUCCESS FOUNDATION**.

Sincerely,

*Yvonne Julian-Hargrove*

**Yvonne Julian-Hargrove, Chairperson**

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## **Brandy Gatlin**

Brandy Tenille Gatlin is in her third year of pursuing a Ph.D. in Curriculum and instruction with a focus in Special Education at Florida State University. She is undergoing rigorous educational research training through the United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Science's Predoctoral Interdisciplinary Research Training (PIRT) Fellowship program at the Florida Center for Reading Research. Brandy's research interests include early literacy intervention, including both reading and writing, and the implications of cultural and linguistic diversity in intervention research and practice. She is also interested in the areas of Response to Intervention, specifically culturally responsive intervention, oral language and dialect differences, individualized instruction, and the prevention of learning disabilities. Brandy recently traveled to Hong Kong to present preliminary research findings on a study examining the use of dialect and its relation to reading comprehension at the Twentieth Annual Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Conference.

Brandy is originally from Jackson, Tennessee. She received both her bachelor's and master's degrees from Florida State University in Emotional Disturbances and Learning Disabilities. Brandy worked as a Special Education teacher in Pembroke Pines, FL for seven years before moving on to pursue her doctoral degree.

Overcoming Obstacles: African American Students with Disabilities Achieving Academic  
Success

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## **Abstract**

Concerns regarding the overrepresentation of minority groups, particularly African Americans, in special education date back many years. While practices such as culturally responsive teaching and response to intervention have been implemented to combat the erroneous placement of students in special education programs, an important focus that remains is the academic progress and postsecondary outcomes for African American students who have been diagnosed with a disability and placed into special education programs. While for other race groups, the number of students with disabilities attending a four-year college or university upon high school graduation has increased, for African Americans that number has decreased. In order to increase the number of African American students with disabilities who successfully pursue postsecondary education at the college or university level, taking a step back and focusing on the factors that have led to the success of school-aged African American students with disabilities is important. In an attempt to begin to counter the vast amount of negative information found in the current literature regarding African Americans in special education, this study highlights two African American high school students with disabilities who have demonstrated academic success, defined as maintaining a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) or above. Teachers who work closely with the students, the parents of the two students, and the students themselves were interviewed and observed in order to gain insight as to which factors these critical team members attribute to each student's academic success. Upon transcribing and analyzing interview data, it was found that three key themes emerged: (a) expectations, (b) support, and (c) organization. This paper discusses these findings and also describes other noteworthy findings, including the existence of a spirit of teamwork among the individuals and that the practice of inclusion seemed to be an important factor in each student's academic

success. Finally, there is a discussion of limitations of the study along with implications for future research and practice.

*Key Words:* special education, minorities, African American, disabilities, high school academic success, qualitative case study

## **Overcoming Obstacles: African American Students with Disabilities Achieving Academic Success**

“Digging the educational graves of many racially and/or economically disadvantaged children...” (p. 9) are the words used by Lloyd Dunn in expressing his concern that far too many children from minority and/or underprivileged backgrounds were being labeled as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed on the basis of cursory identification procedures and inappropriate use of intelligence testing in his seminal 1968 article, *Special Education for the Mentally Retarded*. Concerns about the overrepresentation of minority groups, mainly African Americans, in special education date back many years, and the topic has also gained significant attention more recently (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011). While some argue that the identification of disabilities is important to the acquisition of assistance and accommodations, there is far too often a general stigma, coupled with lowered expectations and sometimes inadequate education, associated with special education.

African Americans and students with disabilities are both recognized as groups that were explicitly denied the opportunity for education at one time. Both groups were once believed by many to neither have the right nor the capability to participate in formal education. The two have run what many would see as a parallel course in the fight for integration and equality. Others argue that their movements for equality have not run a parallel course, but instead have converged and collided with one another, resulting in the segregation of minority students in special education programs (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen, 2005). Critical race theorists in education contend that African American schoolchildren “are systematically marginalized and miseducated in an educational system that seeks only to highlight what they lack and disregards

the cultural wealth they bring to bear” (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010, p. 291). Critical disability theory argues that traditionally, the response to persons with disabilities is one of either pity or “welfarism” (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p.1) and that people with disabilities often experience a system of deep structural, economic, social, political, legal, and cultural inequality. Thus, African Americans with disabilities are members of not one, but two groups that have historically been oppressed and discriminated against, and may be thought of as having a double-edged sword weighing against them.

In more recent years, practices such as culturally responsive teaching and Response to Intervention (RTI) have been implemented to address the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Among other reasons, these practices were put in place to decrease the erroneous placement of students into special education and to increase learning gains made by instructional interventions and regular progress monitoring within the general education setting (Gersten et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2004). However, an important focus that remains is the academic progress and eventually the postsecondary outcomes for those African American students who have been diagnosed with a disability and placed into special education programs. Individuals with disabilities from minority groups continue to be at high risk for poor school performance, high unemployment, low wages, limited access to postsecondary education and training, and fewer opportunities for living independently and participating fully in their communities (Simon, 2001; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996).

Nonetheless, some individuals with disabilities belonging to the African American community *have* been able to demonstrate success. However, the extant literature on African American and other minority groups in special education is fraught with negativity. With this

notion in mind, for this study, it was decided to highlight African American students who have been diagnosed with a disability, but who, despite their circumstances, are academically successful. This study investigates how these academically successful students, along with their systems of support, have worked to overcome their obstacles and to reach their maximum potential.

### **African Americans and Special Education**

The United States is becoming increasingly diverse. According to the U.S. Census Bureau National Population Projection, by the year 2042, minorities will make up over 50% of the population, and by 2023, more than half of all children (2008). Consequently, U.S. schools have become more diverse in recent years. As of the 2009-10 school year, schools with a concentration of more than 50% White students made up 66% of U.S. public schools. In the 1999-2000 school year, only ten years before, that number was 73% (U.S. DOE, 2012). With regard to special education, however, according to the Thirtieth Annual Report to Congress on IDEA, within the special education population, minorities are represented at a disproportionate rate (U.S. DOE, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 2011). In particular, African American children are at the highest risk of receiving a disability label (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Specifically, the categories in which African American students are more likely to be diagnosed – Specific Learning Disability, Mild Intellectual Disability, and Emotional Disturbance – are considered high-incidence and depend on clinical judgment for identification as opposed to verifiable biological data (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; U.S. DOE, OSERS, 2011).

Promisingly, the outlook for students with disabilities is becoming more positive. More students with disabilities are graduating from high school and enrolling in postsecondary

education than ever before (U.S. DOE, Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2011). According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, enrollment into postsecondary institutions across all three of the major race/ethnicity categories (White, African American, and Hispanic) demonstrated a significant increase between the years of 1990 and 2005 (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009; See Figure 1). However, for African American students with disabilities, that increase demonstrated an increased enrollment in business and vocational colleges or two-year and community colleges. Enrollment in four-year colleges and universities actually declined over the course of the study (See Figure 2).

In today's increasingly competitive society, education at the four-year college or university level is integral to achieving lifelong success. While the fact that enrollment in postsecondary education has increased for this group is encouraging, in an increasingly diverse and internationally competitive society, an important focus and goal for educational research and practice should be increasing the number of African American students with disabilities who go on to pursue postsecondary education at the four-year college or university level. Therefore, investigating factors impacting student performance before that time is important as preparation for education at the college or university level begins before matriculation into the postsecondary institution. This study begins to address this issue by examining the various factors leading to the academic success of African American high school students identified as having a disability. In the extant literature, studies regarding the performance and practices of minority students with disabilities, particularly African American students with disabilities, at the secondary level are rare and almost always focus on the deficiencies of this group. However, this study takes the opposite approach and focuses on African American students with disabilities who have demonstrated academic *success* at the high school level. This rarely seen, positive angle will

demonstrate that African American students, even those identified with disabilities, are quite capable of attaining academic success, and in the study contributing factors leading to their achievements are discussed.

Research regarding the topic of minority groups in special education has explored various factors that contribute to deficiencies present among these groups. Among topics investigated are teacher beliefs and expectations, parent and family involvement, and the students themselves in order to gain their perspectives. The existing research demonstrates the importance of each of these components to student performance, but also reveals a vast amount of negativity and the tendency for finger-pointing in the explanations of underperformance for this group.

**Teacher beliefs and expectations.** Some studies have highlighted the impact, and often negative consequences, of low teacher expectations on the performance of minorities in special education. For instance, a study conducted by Crawford (2007) purported to examine the impact of teacher expectations on student performance. By interviewing and observing four special education teachers in an urban high school setting, the author sought to examine potential underlying teacher pre-determined biases and to investigate the impact of teachers' expectations on their lesson planning and interaction with their students. In her study, Crawford provided a sample exercise from materials used with the students, which included not only stereotypical references but also unsophisticated syntactical structures, falling well below the state's expectations and standards for students at the high school level. In her findings, Crawford pointed out two key themes that emerged in examining each teacher's curriculum – that each was embedded with underlying beliefs and expectations, and that students were not given sufficient opportunities to develop the higher order thinking skills that they needed for high stakes exams. Crawford also gave brief excerpts from the teacher interviews, including their

justifications for using elementary level materials with high school students and their beliefs about their students' inferior intellectual capacity. These excerpts added to the author's argument that the teachers' pre-existing beliefs guide curricular choice.

Building on the work of scholars of critical race studies, Lynn and colleagues (2010) conducted a study exploring teachers' beliefs about African American students in general education. The researchers conducted focus groups, interviews, and observations in a suburban high school where the population of Black students was 99%. They found that teachers and administrators tended to have three main explanations as to why African American students in the school were persistently failing to meet academic standards: (a) student behavior and attitudes toward school, (b) community forces, and (c) lack of parental commitment to student growth. The authors concluded that the role that teachers play in the academic achievement of African Americans cannot be underestimated. While this study focused on African Americans within the general education context, it is relevant to this study because it demonstrates the importance of teacher beliefs and practices on outcomes for students.

**Parent and family involvement.** Some studies have investigated familial influences on the outcomes for African American students with disabilities. In their synthesis of empirical studies examining the parental involvement of African American students in special education in their children's schooling, Davis, Brown, Bantz, and Manno (2002) found that common topics emerged, including barriers to parental involvement and parents' perceptions and beliefs. The authors concluded that, at the time, there was a lack of empirical research focusing on the parental involvement of African Americans who have children with disabilities participating in special education programs. However, the authors also found a substantial recent increase in the extant literature in the number of studies investigating the involvement of parents of African

American schoolchildren with disabilities, suggesting that researchers were beginning to acknowledge the importance of the topic. In a later study, Harry, Klingner, and Hart (2005) used the findings of three years of ethnographic research to challenge the belief that African American parents living in poverty are the cause of their children's learning difficulties. The authors believed that stepping into the world of the families and knowing them firsthand would provide a different picture from the stereotypical views often expressed. The study detailed the researchers' findings after visits to three particular students' homes and summarized findings after interviewing school personnel. The study revealed an often negative perception and tone held by school staff members in regard to the parents and families of the students, despite the often contradictory positive home life found by the researchers. Their case studies provided the other side of the "dysfunctional parent" image so common in schools and in society at large.

**Student perceptions.** Other studies have focused on African American students with disabilities themselves as the most salient source of information regarding contributing factors to performance. In one study, Peterson (2011) came to several interesting conclusions after deliberately reflecting on the participant and researcher relationship within a study investigating the educational experiences of four young African American women with disabilities. The researcher concluded that future research on individuals with disabilities should focus on building reciprocal relationships and building theory through dialogue. Peterson also encourages building a body of research that is held of value not because it is academically rigorous or publishable, but because it is perceived to be relevant for persons with disabilities, especially in ways that promote social change. In one other recent qualitative study, the author focused on African American males with disabilities who had previously dropped out of high school (Hobbs, 2010). The study purported to examine the perspectives of these young men and to

investigate specific influences on their non-completion of high school. This study found that for these young men, placement into self-contained classrooms, along with other factors – including lack of positive peer relationships and not understanding or knowing how to move forward – and sequences of events, led them to feel there was no point in continuing their education, which ultimately led to each of them dropping out of high school.

### **African Americans with Disabilities in College**

Some recent studies have focused on the performance of African American students with disabilities who do enroll in a four-year college or a university. For instance, studies have explored strategies to improve skills among groups of African American students with disabilities essential for success at the college level including self-advocacy skills (Walker & Test, 2011) and writing skills (Nicholas, Menchetti, & Nettles, 2005). In both studies, the authors found positive outcomes after brief interventions in which students were explicitly taught certain basic skills. However, both research studies emphasized the need to garner these skills as early as possible in the students' academic careers. Because these students began their college careers lacking or low in these important skills, taking a step back and investigating students at the high school level is critical in order to examine and tackle these sorts of issues before these students begin college.

### **The Current Study**

Literature regarding the topic of African American students with disabilities is not hard to find. However, the current literature is laden with negative information. While studies such as these are important for teachers, researchers, and policymakers in order to gain a better understanding of the contributing factors leading to these student outcomes, focusing on the factors that have led to the *success* of African American school age students with disabilities is

an important next step if we are to continue to make progress and increase the numbers of African American students with disabilities who go on to successfully pursue postsecondary education at the four-year college or university level. The current study builds upon previous research that has pointed out the deficiencies of the group, seeking the perspectives of those deemed to have the most significant impact on student outcomes: teachers, parents, and the students themselves. However, unlike previous research, our study's purpose was to explicitly highlight success stories of students with disabilities from the African American community. In particular, the following research question guided this study: What factors contribute to the academic success of African American students with disabilities at the secondary level? Specifically, what are the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of teachers and parents of African American high school students with disabilities who achieve academic success? In addition, what are the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of African American high school students with disabilities who achieve academic success?

This case study focused on two high school students with documented disabilities with a cumulative or a current academic GPA of 3.0 or higher. First, the study investigated the perspectives of teachers who work closely with these students in order to assess the factors that they contribute to these individuals' academic success. The next focus was on parental attitudes and behaviors contributing to academic success, as well as home and community factors that have promoted excellence in student performance. Finally, the students themselves were interviewed in order to gain their perspective as to what factors they contribute to their high academic achievement.

## **Method**

A qualitative research approach was used for this study. This method was chosen in order to explore the views of the students, parents, and teachers involved. The purpose of the study was to delve into the perspectives of the teachers, parents, and students involved in order to share with others. As stated by Merriam (2009), “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p. 1). Because the goal of this study is to do just that, this study was grounded in this belief.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

According to Creswell (2009), in choosing a qualitative design, the researcher implicitly acknowledges certain philosophical assumptions. Those assumptions include ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric, and methodology. Related to ontology, or the nature of reality, in choosing a qualitative design, researchers acknowledge the idea of multiple realities. The qualitative researcher also attempts to get as close as possible to the participants being studied, by conducting research in the field. This facet is referred to as the epistemological assumption. The axiological assumption refers to the researcher explicitly acknowledging his or her own values and biases and addressing how they affect the research interpretations. The rhetorical assumption in qualitative research refers to the fact that language in qualitative research tends to be more personal, literary, and informal. These assumptions provided the foundation for our research methodology, which follows an inductive logical process in the collecting and analyzing of the data.

### **Qualitative Research Approach**

In particular, this study used a case study design with components of ethnography and phenomenology. According to Creswell (2007), case study research explores an issue through

one or more cases within a bounded system. In this study, the issue is the success of African American students with disabilities, and the bounded system is the study setting, the high school in which the study took place. In this multiple case study, also known as a collective case study, we focused on the issue at hand and present cases that illustrate the issue. We investigated unique variables of each of the individual students and highlight common factors and themes associated with high levels of academic achievement.

Borrowing from a phenomenological approach, we sought to describe the thoughts and practices of the participants of the study as they all have in common the phenomenon of dealing with a disability and achieving success in spite of it. A study using a phenomenological approach purports to describe the meaning of lived experiences of several individuals sharing a common human experience or phenomenon and to reduce those individual experiences into a “description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Because two cultural variables, race and disability, were explored, this study also utilized some components of ethnographic research. An ethnographic approach to qualitative research involves describing and interpreting the shared and learned behaviors, values, and language of a group that shares a culture (Creswell, 2007).

### **Participants**

We began this research study by outlining eligibility criteria for the study’s participants. We wanted to include only students identified according to parent-reported school information as African American. The students were selected among those enrolled in a South Florida high school located in the country’s seventh largest school district. We selected among students who had previously been determined by school personnel to have a disability that potentially impacted their academic performance. Each of these students either had a current Individual

Education Plan (IEP) or a Transition Individual Education Plan (TIEP), depending on the student's age. The study also included as potential participants students who had recently (within the last 3 years) been dismissed from special education services, which would indicate that these students still had a disability, yet their disability no longer negatively impacted their academic performance to the point where special education services were needed. As academic success was a necessary factor for this study, we selected a criterion of a 3.0 cumulative GPA or higher based on a 4.0 scale in order to define academic success. Students who had a current semester GPA of 3.0 or higher were also considered in order to document strategies that the students may have utilized to improve performance.

Originally, we anticipated that roughly 10-15 individuals would meet eligibility criteria for the study, and that those African American high school students with disabilities would be the initial focus of this study. However, after the initial screening using the selected criteria, we found that only four students met eligibility criteria for the study. Of those four, we received parental permission to participate in the study from two students, both African American females. Participants of the study also included the mothers of each of the two students and two teachers who work closely with both students. The teachers selected for the study were the school's Exceptional Student Education (ESE) support facilitator, Mrs. Anderson<sup>1</sup>, and another teacher, Mrs. Laughlin, the Intensive Reading instructor who is dually certified in Reading and ESE instruction and works with a number of students with IEPs.

## **Procedures**

For this study, the initial intention was to collect data using surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations. However, because the study only included two student participants,

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of study participants

the focus group was removed from the procedure. Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, school approval, and parental consent, general information on the students (e.g., GPA, courses taken, standardized test scores) was collected using databases and information provided by the school, parents, and the students themselves. General demographic information on parents and home life (e.g., parent level of education, occupation, number of siblings) was obtained using a survey. Finally, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with each study participant.

### **Reflexivity and Data Analysis**

It is important to point out that the author and researcher is a former special education teacher and is also an African American female. The potential impact that having experience working with students with disabilities and also belonging to a similar demographic group as the study participants may have on the study is recognized. It is also acknowledged that while the perspective may not be entirely neutral, the major intent in carrying out this research study is to tell the story from the perspectives of the students themselves, the parents, and the teachers who work closely with them, in order to document and highlight the educational success of these students and the contributing factors leading to their high academic achievement. In addition, the author was formerly employed at the high school in which the study took place and also as a private tutor for one of the research participants when she was in elementary school. Being involved in a trusted relationship gave the author the opportunity to receive open and honest feedback from the participants. However, the author notes that because of this familiarity, the students and parents may have still viewed this author as a “teacher” and that responses may have been generated based on such a viewpoint.

Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting and audio-recorded by the author. One student and one mother chose not to be audio-recorded and selected to write their answers instead to the interview questions. During interviews, the author also made observational field notes. Shortly after interviews were conducted, interviews and observation notes were transcribed and analyzed by the author. Connections between categories and themes were documented. Strategies for validation of findings included a triangulation method, in which the author strategically cross-compared findings from interviews, observations, and documents reviewed.

## **Results**

The display of results from the study begins by describing the two students who were the focus of the case study. Next is the detail of the major themes that emerged upon the analysis of transcriptions of interviews and observation notes. Finally, there is a discussion of other findings that were not necessarily overarching themes, but that are believed to be pertinent to the study.

### **Students**

**Angela.** One student, Angela, had just completed her freshmen year with a 3.72 GPA. Angela's family moved to the South Florida area before Angela was born. Angela's father, a musician, lives at home with the family about six months of the year but travels to various parts of the world where he performs with his band. Angela's mother works part time as a para-professional at an elementary school. Angela is the youngest of five, with two older siblings presently in college. Angela enjoys singing and has performed with her father previously. She was diagnosed with a learning disability at six years of age when she was in first grade. Angela also has a medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), for which she has never taken medication.

**Janeice.** The second student, Janeice, began her junior year in the fall of 2013. Janeice also comes from a relatively large family; she is, however, the oldest of four. Janeice has a 3.2 GPA and lives with her mother, stepfather, and three younger siblings, ages 12, 8, and 5. Janeice's mother is a nurse and her stepfather works at an architectural firm. Janeice began receiving services for special education as a second-grader, when she was diagnosed with an emotional disturbance that significantly contributed to a decline in her academic performance. Since then, Janeice has participated in counseling and sees a therapist on occasion, according to her mother.

### **Themes**

Based on the coding procedures used for this study, three themes emerged from observations and one-on-one interviews conducted with the study participants: (a) expectations, (b) support, and (c) organization. Each theme, along with supporting quotations, is discussed below.

**Expectations.** This category emerged from conversations related to contributing factors to the success of the students. In particular, each teacher and both parents used the word "expectations" or the phrase "believing in" at least once. Teachers and parents of the students all expressed that they had high expectations for their student/child, and that while they were understanding of the disability, they did not let the child (or anyone else) use the disability as an excuse for low academic performance. When asked what personal characteristics she feels have contributed to her students' academic success, one teacher, Mrs. Anderson (the ESE teacher), replied, "Believing that they all have the potential, that they all have something at which they are very good at... [it] is just a matter of discovering what it is and once they do, they will be successful." Mrs. Laughlin (the Intensive Reading teacher) also made a similar point regarding

strategies that have helped her students to succeed academically. She stated, “I expect them all to learn, no matter the ability level.” Mrs. Laughlin went on to say, “I believe the greatest factor contributing to student success is the parent’s expectation of the child. If a parent expects the student to learn, then the child will learn. If the parent doesn’t show concern, then the child will not care about his or her education.”

Angela’s mother pointed out that she wanted all of her children to go to college and to be successful, and just because her child had a disability (gesturing quotation marks), that she was no different. She commented:

When they told me that Angela had a learning disability, of course, I was disappointed.

But at the same time, I felt kind of relieved, you know, I guess... because it made me feel like, well there’s a reason she’s not doing so well. She struggled in kindergarten... I was happy because I knew she would get the help she needed... But I always tell Angela, you do your best, and I still want a good report card every time. I’ll get you a tutor, you can stay afterschool, you’re going to have to work hard, but you can’t let it stop you.

While neither of the students actually used the term *expectations*, they both implied that they were well aware of their disabilities, but at the same time, and perhaps even more so, aware of their capabilities. Both expressed high expectations for themselves. Angela stated that she has a goal of attending University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) because they not only have a great music school, but they also research cancer; she wants to eventually become an oncologist. Janeice’s post high school aspiration is to go to college and become a teacher.

**Support.** In addition to an ongoing theme of high expectations, each interview highlighted the participants’ ideology on the importance of support for each of the students. Angela’s mother has previously and continues to use a large portion of her income from part-

time employment to pay for tutoring expenses for her daughter. Angela has also received academic help from her older siblings. Notably, Angela stated that her older sisters are her role models because they have all done well in school and have helped her when she needed it. Angela's confidence in the support provided by the teachers was also evident in her response to the question asking about factors that have helped her. She responded that she always asks for help when she needs it in class. Janeice also discussed the importance of having support in her home environment as well as at school. She said some of her teachers have stayed after school to help her, even though she knows they didn't have to.

Mrs. Anderson felt that one personal characteristic of hers that helped her students succeed academically was her "being someone they can trust and they can talk to." She added that "helping them feel loved, understood, and accepted for who they are, regardless of their disability" was important for helping her students to achieve academic success. In addition, both teachers highlighted the importance of not only teacher support in the academic success of the student, but also the parent's crucial role. Mrs. Laughlin felt that one of the greatest influences on student academic success was supportive parents. She stated:

When parents are involved in their children's education, children do better. In addition to improving our teacher education programs, we need to find ways to get parents to be more positively involved in their child's education... Achieving a good education is a team effort and all factions of the team must do their part, including the child, in order to get a good quality education.

**Organization.** While high expectations and support emerged first and foremost as themes throughout the coding process, organization was perhaps the most practically based theme that came about in the analysis of the transcriptions. The two teachers, especially,

emphasized the importance of being organized in order to succeed academically. Mrs. Anderson stated, “I believe some contributing factors for students to become successful are effective organization skills, clear academic goals, and appropriate study skills and habits.”

Angela felt that one of the biggest contributors to her success was organization and note-taking. She said it helps when she writes things down in her planner and when she can look back at her notes from class. She stated that she keeps work and notes from different class subjects in various colored folders and that this method has been very helpful for her.

Notably, Mrs. Laughlin advised that not only students be organized, but also parents as well as other teachers of students with special needs be organized in order to help the student as much as possible. Janeice’s mother also mentioned that she keeps all of her daughter’s paperwork in a folder so that she is prepared every time the school calls a meeting or if she has a question. She said she also helps Janeice with her organization skills because it is a lifelong skill that she will need.

### **Other Findings**

In addition to the major themes uncovered, other noteworthy findings are worth discussing. In contrast to studies that investigated contributors to the deficiencies of African American students with disabilities, the participants in this study emphasized the role of teamwork in helping to promote student success. Each participant – the teachers, the mothers, and the two students – seemed to recognize the importance and value of each team player, taking neither full responsibility nor an insignificant stance in the positive outcomes that have been achieved. Each participant explicitly discussed their own as well as the others’ roles in the academic success of the students. The language used by the teachers and parents was generally

indicative of a spirit of teamwork; notably, Mrs. Laughlin used the word “we” when referring to finding ways to get parents to be more positively involved.

In addition, it is also important to note that, since their initial diagnoses, both students in the study have participated in the general education curriculum. As a component of their IEPs, each student receives accommodations and assistance in order to meet their IEP goals; however, neither has ever been in a self-contained special education classroom nor has been pulled for special education services outside of the general education setting. Both students receive academic support through the ESE program within general education classrooms. Both Angela and Janeice’s mother felt that this was a significant factor in their academic success.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to investigate factors leading to the academic success of African American high school students who had been diagnosed with a disability. Far too often in the literature regarding this population of students, researchers have examined deficiencies of this group, but have focused little attention on the positive outcomes that have resulted from minority students being diagnosed with disabilities. Through the selection criteria, the study focused on two African American females, one with a Learning Disability and ADD and the other with an Emotional Disturbance, who participated in their school’s special education program. Three overarching themes resulted from the interviews and observations: high expectations, support, and organization. There were significant other findings that appeared relevant to the academic success of the two students – teamwork and the practice of inclusion of these students’ special education services implemented in the general education classroom.

The current study demonstrates a significant contrast from studies that have investigated contributors to deficiencies and the low performance of minority students, and especially

minority students in special education. In this study, unlike previous studies, teachers shared their beliefs regarding their high expectations for student performance. While previous research demonstrated teachers' blaming parents and the community environment for poor performance, the teacher participants in this study recognized their critical roles in the academic outcomes of their students. In addition, the parents of these academically successful students shared their beliefs regarding the high expectations they had for their students and not using the disability as an excuse for low performance. Finally, the students themselves expressed that they too had expectations that exceeded mediocre performance, stating goals of attending college and having professional careers upon graduation.

In addition, regarding the practices of teachers, parents, and students, this study revealed the importance of both support and organization in positive academic outcomes for these students. Having a support system of not only teachers and parents was important for the students, but also for one of the study participants, having older siblings who were supportive also served a major role in the academic outcomes for the student. Organization was a key component among the study participants, not just the students. Perhaps the organizational skills and the emphasis placed on these skills by both the teachers and parents played a part in the students' own acknowledgement of the importance of organization in academic success.

In this study, two other important findings were observed. Unlike previous studies regarding the underperformance of students belonging to minority groups with disabilities, the participants in this study recognized and valued each team member's role in the academic success of each of the students. Each of the participants (the teachers, parents, and the students) appeared to embrace the African proverb: "It takes a village," and the students' success is evidence of the importance of taking this adage to heart. In addition, both of the academically

successful students in our study received services in the general education classroom. It is reasonable therefore to assume that the fact that the participants in our study were not separated from their peers who were enrolled full time in the general education program is an important contributor to the academic success of these students. Built on the principle that every student should be valued for his or her exceptional abilities and included as important members of the school community, Obiakor and colleagues (2012), among others (see also Jenkins, Odom, & Speltz, 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996), argue that inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms is not only ethical, but also provides direct benefit to students who may have challenges. In the inclusive classroom, students with disabilities have access to “meaningful, rigorous general education curricula; and special education is specifically designed instruction to assist them in maximizing their highest potential” (Obiakor et al., 2012, p. 478).

### **Limitations, Future Research, and Implications**

This research study was not without limitations. First, the criteria of academically successful high school students with a current or recent IEP or TIEP may have excluded some students who had a disability but did not require ESE services. In addition, the study was limited to one high school in one school district. Extending this research to include students who have a disability, but are not currently participating in the ESE program and to other high schools may help to generalize findings. In addition, the study included two African American females. This finding helps to demonstrate the need for further research to extend to African American males who have a disability who are academically successful. Further, the student participants were both from two-income homes. Although the professions of the parents were not similar, the income level of the parents arguably had a significant impact on the outcomes of the students. Resources such as private tutoring or counseling may not be readily available for a student from

a family with a lower income level. Future research on students from minority groups with disabilities who are academically successful may purport to include students from various demographic backgrounds in order to highlight stories of success that go beyond students from two-parent, middle socioeconomic level homes.

A significant amount of research has demonstrated that both teacher and parent expectations and beliefs are positively associated with children's school achievement (e.g., Areepattamannil, 2010; Crawford, 2007; Thompson, Warren, & Carter, 2004). More research that uncovers and highlights the motivation behind teachers and parents who demonstrate high expectations and beliefs for their students and children may prove beneficial. Further, researchers have documented positive relations among self-acceptance, self-efficacy beliefs, and racial pride, with all three positively associated with academic persistence for African American students (Butler-Barnes, Chavous, Hurd, & Varner, 2013). Extending this type of research to African American students with disabilities may help to disentangle the thought processes behind academically successful students in order to gain a better understanding of the drive and spirit exemplified by the students such as the ones included in this study.

In this study, both student participants received special education services within the general education classroom. This observation is in direct contrast to the Hobbs (2010) study, in which students were placed in self-contained special education classes and eventually dropped out of high school. In our opinion, this finding speaks volumes to the special education field. Students enrolled in special education are to be educated in the least restrictive environment, as determined by their IEP team (U.S. DOE, 2004). Much debate has ensued over the topic of inclusion (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005), or mainstreaming as it was once called, of students with special needs in the general education classroom. While the

determination of the least restrictive environment is a case-by-case team decision, the findings of this study provide support for the inclusion of students in special education programs in general education environments to the highest extent possible. Further, this study indicates the importance of both teacher and parent support and expectations for special needs students once they are placed into inclusive environments.

## **Conclusions**

Although minority overrepresentation in special education programs is a continuing concern, the aim of this study was to put a positive spin on the issue. That was accomplished with this study as it highlighted two African American students who are academically successful despite their diagnoses as persons with disabilities. While it is promising that overall, the outlook for students with disabilities is becoming more positive, one goal of this researcher is for more minority students, despite their exceptionalities, to be able to eventually compete in an increasingly competitive society. The results of this study provide important and direct implications not only for teachers, parents, and students, but also for school administrators and other members of IEP teams as well as the community in general because it demonstrates the beneficial outcomes that can transpire when positive supports are in place and when inclusion with appropriate support is practiced. Moreover, this study suggests the need for further research focusing on more positive aspects of educational issues that traditionally have received negative attention and discouraging press. Certainly the struggle for equality in education for African Americans and children with disabilities is not over; however the results of this study provide evidence of accumulating progress since Dunn's (1968) revolutionary article.

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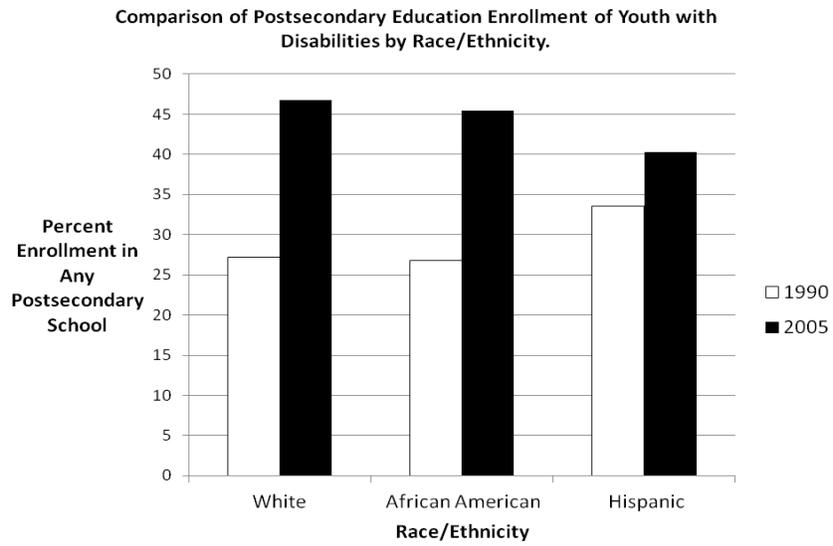
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Figure 1. Comparison of postsecondary education enrollment of youth with disabilities by race/ethnicity.

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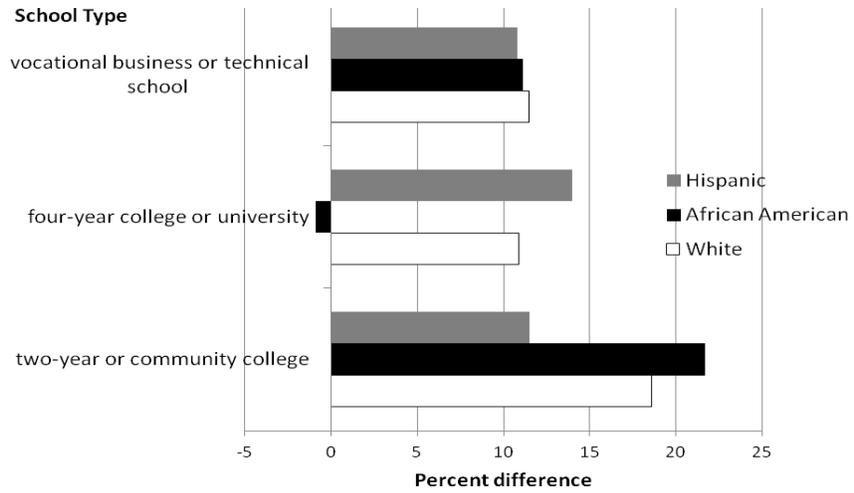


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Figure 1. Data sources: Newman, et al. 2009, 2010; U.S. DOE, 2011.

Figure 2. Percent difference in enrollment by school type between years 1990- 2005.

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Figure 2. Data sources: Newman, et al. 2009, 2010; U.S. DOE, 2011.

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