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# Exploring the Experiences of African American students with learning disabilities in the post-secondary setting

George Williams Jr

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**Exploring the Experiences of African American students with learning disabilities in the post- secondary setting**

**BY**

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M. Ed., Special Education, University of South Florida, 2003

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Special Education**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**May, 2011**

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of my intellectual ancestors, specifically my wonderful Auntie, Ms. Addie B. Williams, for understanding me, exhibiting elegant grace, and loving me unconditionally. I know you are in a place where no one is crying, and ain't nobody worried. Please continue to watch over me as one of God's singing angels!

To my dear sister Inah T. Williams for reminding me I am the first born and taking care of mom and dad while I've been away physically and mentally. And to my little brother Jeremiah O. Williams for his visible encouragement; thanks for teaching me the reality of disAbilities by working twice as hard.

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And finally to my entire family and closes friends for reminding me of my own strengthen and loving me sky full! The long distance phone calls, stimulating conversations, laughs, and smiles inspired me to never give up!

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**EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN THE POST-  
SECONDARY SETTING**

by

**George Alexander Williams, Jr.**

**Bachelor of Science in Special Education**

**Master of Arts in Special Education**

**Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education**

**ABSTRACT**

During the last 50 years, the overrepresentation of students from African American descent in special education programs has engendered much concern within the education community. In addition, the problem of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education exists in American society as a whole. Given these statistics, little information is available on the perceptions and experiences of African American students with learning disabilities (LD) as they enter higher education. The review of literature indicates that the body of research lacks the voices of African American students with LD in higher education. Lack of research in this area puts unnecessary constraints on the possibility of enhancing the academic achievement and building on cultural experiences as well as preferred learning environments of African American students with LD.

The purpose of this study is to illuminate actual experiences and perceptions of three African American male students with LD matriculating in the university settings. The results of this research add to the literature on African American students with LD in higher education and gives voice to those African American students that are underrepresented in the special education literature addressing their experiences in the post-secondary setting. This research reflects the experiences and perceptions of African American students with LD while bringing awareness to higher education faculty, staff, and peers to allow African American students with LD to participate fully in their education and complete college successfully. The results of this case study revealed that participants' experiences and perceptions as an African American student with LD have limited impact in their post-secondary education. Participants associated themselves more with being a college student without identifying with the special education label.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### **Overview**

This chapter will define the topic and highlight the problem, significance, and scope of the work in preparation to accentuate the experiences of African American students with learning disabilities (LD), specifically in the post-secondary setting. The education of African American students with LD has been unstable and disturbing at best. Historically, African American students, as a group, have experienced segregation and discrimination in the American school system (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Once Public Law 94-142 came into existence, many students were being referred to receive services, especially in the areas of intellectual disabilities and LD. Being African American and having a disability jeopardized these students even more as they now belonged to two marginalized groups (Herbert & Cheatham, 1988).

In the 1960's, special education received national attention due to the disproportionate representation of African American students (Obiakor & Ford, 2002). Lloyd Dunn alerted the profession of the overrepresentation of these students in his 1968 historical article in the *Journal of Exceptional Children* (Dunn, 1968). Since that time, researchers have debated the issue is disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. This debate has included ~~how~~ "how" overrepresentation is calculated.

Traditionally, the placement of students from any ethnic group in special education programs is calculated by the percentage of students from that group in such programs (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). The number of students from these ethnic groups that

are receiving services in special education is higher than their percentage of the school population as a whole, the issues of overrepresentation is called into question (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001).

In a study conducted at Harvard University, the Civil Rights Project concluded, "school districts nationwide continue to improperly and disproportionately place minority students in special education classes despite an increase in civil rights protections and special education services over the past 25 years" (Harvard Civil Rights Project, Conference on Minority Issues in Special Education, 2000, p. 166). In the fall of 2006, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Special Education Programs statistics showed that although African Americans represented 15% of all students, they represented 21% of students in the category of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) K- 12 education settings (Harry and Klingner, 2006).

### **Brief Background of the Education of African American Students**

Early research studies on learning and teaching focused predominantly on students in the K-12 setting (American Association of School Administrators, 1991). In addition, those studies focused primarily on nonminority students. More importantly, few studies exist at the post-secondary level and few studies addressed African American students (Swanson, 1995). In recent times, there has been a surfacing of studies regarding the learning styles of African American students in the k-12 levels, but post-secondary studies exploring the African American learning remain rare.

Due to the lack of research on how many minority students learn, African-American students who struggle academically are faced with a traditional pedagogy that

may or may not balance the way they desire to learn in the classroom (Hale-Benson, 1986; Kunjufu, 1984). As the population of African American students increases, faculty will have a more challenging and difficult task in preparing these students for a high-skilled technological society. This issue is critical because all educational institutions are functioning in a state of greater accountability (Wooldridge, 1995). If one argues that African American students bring different kinds of styles of learning to the classroom, faculty may not be able to address the learning needs of these students accordingly.

Anderson and Adams (1992) stated:

One of the most significant challenges that university instructors face is to be tolerant and perceptive enough to recognize learning differences among their students. Many instructors do not recognize learning differences among their students. Many instructors do not realize that students vary in the way that they process and understand information. The notions that all students' cognitive skills are identical at the collegiate level indicate arrogance and elitism by sanctioning one group's style of learning while discrediting the styles of others (p. 19).

It is important for instructors to be aware of their own learning preferences. The instructor's style may influence the teaching methods chosen within the learning environment. Students and instructor's different styles of learning can interfere with the educational process and raise the discomfort level. However, when the learning styles of students are similar to those of an instructor, they may exhibit greater achievement and personal satisfaction (Felder, 1996). Researchers exploring learning styles suggest that there is a difference between cultural groups and method of how they learn in the classroom (Park, 2001; Zhang & Sternberg, 2001). These findings suggest that even in classrooms consisting of a single cultural group, such as reservation schools, teachers must use a variety of instructional strategies (Hilberg and Tharp, 2002).

## **African American Learning**

When considering the instructional methods of faculty, researchers indicate that several teaching strategies may be preferable to African American students. For example, African American students may generally prefer an oral mode rather than a written mode of informational transmission (Ladson-Billings, 1992). While mainstream teachers may prefer to teach using one stimuli at a time, African American students may prefer a varied presentation method (Boykin, 1986; Vasquez, 1990). Students may be expected to remain silent while a teacher talks and then wait until they are called upon to talk. This teaching style however, may differ from the cultural norms of some African American students whose communicative styles value more active participation (Boykin, 1994).

In addition, African-American students' acquisition of knowledge seems to accelerate and elevate when learning in cooperative groups (Slavin, 1977). For instance, Boykin (1994) found that African-American students, in the K- 20 setting, work well in cooperative groups and learn new material when there is no reward system and where there is intrinsic value only. As Ladson-Billings' (1992) explains, "culture plays a role in communicating and receiving information" (p. 43). It shapes the thinking process of groups and individuals.

Another pattern of considerable prominence found in the African-American life experience is the interactional pattern of "call-and-response." Smitherman (1977) provides a definition of call and-response as "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements (e.g., known as calls) are punctuated by expressions (e.g., known as responses) from the listener" (p.

104). This pattern is a dramatic example during services at churches in which the preacher's speech transformed into a litany of sentences and responses from the listeners. The spontaneous reactions and supportive statements of encouragement involve the speaker and listeners in a dynamic interactional dialogue (Smitherman, 1977). In contrast, the traditional Euro-American engagement audience reacts only at appropriately defined moments.

The use of instructional methods that would maximize student response and involvement are likely to be much more effective in reaching African-American children. Often, the teacher benefits from the instant feedback and the student gains a connection with what is being presented. Singing activities often stimulate such resounding interest because they involve the kind of group participation that reaffirms the sense of oneness, which is a critical cultural pattern among African American students (Nobles, 1986). Teachers must elevate levels of authentic knowledge of African American culture to improve the pedagogy in the classroom. Educators that are not exposed to African American learning styles may have an effect on perceived level of competency, which result in a student being placed in special education settings.

### **African American students with Learning Disabilities**

It has been 65 years since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision declaring school segregation unconstitutional (*Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, 1954). In the fall of 1950, Linda Brown, a seven-year-old third grader, was denied admission to a modern elementary school blocks from her home in Topeka, Kansas. Because of the segregation laws, Linda walked six blocks to take a school bus to a Black school while there was a

White school within seven blocks of her residence. Along with 12 other families in Topeka, Linda's family joined forces with The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to file suit against the school district. As the Topeka case made its way to the United States Supreme Court, it was joined with four other NAACP cases from Delaware, Virginia, South Carolina and Washington, D.C. These cases were collectively known as *Brown v. Board of Education*.

This case displayed the racial segregation imposed on African American students. The segregated conditions in schools such as poor resources produced a sense of inadequacy and lowered self-esteem among African American students (Blanchett, Brantlinger, & Shealey, 2005). Thurgood Marshall, as well as other lawyers in the case, argued that African American students experienced separate and unequal school conditions. Moreover, lawyers argued that African American students should be afforded the same educational advantages as their White counterparts.

The legislation desegregated public schools and changed the separate philosophy of American society. The practices within educational policies have created a new structure of segregation through the use of busing and logistical strategies (Blanchett, Brantlinger, & Shealey, 2005). Whether fair or not, educational opportunity and academic achievement are directly related to the social divisions associated with ethnical identity, (Price, 2002) and disability. A current and separate dilemma of the twenty-first century is the over-representation of African American students in special education programs (Patton, 1998).

## **Overrepresentation Issue**

Lloyd Dunn's groundbreaking *Exceptional Children* article in 1968 initiated the awareness of the disproportionate number of minority students labeled as educable mentally retarded (Oswald, et al., 1999). The belief that current special education practices were morally and educationally wrong, he stated:

“In my best judgment, about 60 to 80 percent of the pupils taught by these teachers are children from low-status backgrounds—Afro-Americans, American Indians, Mexicans, and Puerto Rican Americans; those from nonstandard English speaking broken, disorganized and inadequate homes; and children from other nonmiddle class environments” (p. 6).

Dunn argued that the identification and placement in special education of socioculturally deprived children with mild learning problems was of concern because of the nature of these settings; the questionable benefits of these placements; and the detrimental effects of labeling. His initial analysis has set off a broad array of policy legislation, court cases, and research initiatives that have each tested the validity of how the United States classify and educate minority students. Since Dunn first touched on the issue, the study of overrepresentation has expanded from students identified as mildly mentally retarded to include the categories of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and LD.

Despite the emergence of court decisions, the issue of overrepresentation has not gone through drastic changes since Dunn's initial findings (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

African Americans, as well as other minority students, continue to be classified in high incident disabilities (i.e., learning disability, behavior disorders) at a proportionally higher rate than Caucasian and Asian American students. Few researchers have reached a compromise on the nature of the overrepresentation trend and how to perform realistic

measures to combat the disproportionate numbers of minorities in special education. The issue of overrepresentation is going to vary greatly in prescriptions for change (MacMillian, & Reschly, 1998). The discussion surrounding overrepresentation has initiated a number of research studies (Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Herrera, 1998). However, these solutions do not provide a clear agenda for reform.

It is necessary to understand the reasons for overrepresentation before suggesting changes in policy or practice. Researchers in the field of education research study these causes in distinctly different ways. For example, Alfredo Artiles (1998) suggests that researchers have traditionally framed the debate over the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education as a binary question: “Is disproportionality due to structural factors (e.g. institutional discrimination) or to minority students’ shortcomings produced by poverty?” (p. 33). As other researchers in the field would suggest, overrepresentation is an issue of ethnicity and culture or of socioeconomic status (Harry, 1994; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Patton, 1998; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). The variety of approaches leads to different researchers to different solutions to the problem.

Different formulas for calculating overrepresentation can yield vastly different results. The oldest database used for monitoring disproportionate representation of minority children is the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), which presently focuses on the representation of minority students in the four high-incidence special education categories of intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance, developmental delays and SLD. For example, eight percent of the children in America’s public school are African American students (see **Figure 1**). However, their representation in special education classes, as a

student with SLD, is nearly 15 percent (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2006). The data suggest that African American students are most likely placed in special education.

Over the past three decades, studies similar to the OCR surveys continue to reveal a pattern of overrepresentation of African American students in special education classrooms for SLD (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of students in special education programs is significantly close to the total student population. Abundantly clear, African Americans, as well as Latino and American Indian students, are represented in special education in numbers greater than their percentages in the general school population. When this happens repeatedly and primarily to targeted populations of students in a school district, this results in a disproportionate percentage and overrepresentation of membership in the special education setting.

**Is Overrepresentation Significant?** There is much debate over what is the exact cause for the common placement of African Americans in special education programs. Macmillan and Reschly (1998), in their secondary analysis of the OCR data, suggest that the United States have placed too much emphasis on ethnic overrepresentation, and should have phrased the problem in terms of socio-economic status and the interaction of ethnicity and poverty. The OCR data treats the two as interwoven, or even with ethnicity as a proxy for socio-economic status (1998). As a result, researchers describes overrepresentation in terms of ethnicity, they are often describing the conditions of poverty that are disproportionately experienced by African American communities. They

suggest by developing opportunities for all students, disproportionality should not be recognized as an issue of systematic failing (Westat, 2003).

Working from a different conceptual framework, the overrepresentation issue of African American students in special education is of miscategorization that leads to misplacement, and misplacement leads to misinstruction (Obiakor & Ford, 2002). In furtherance, misinstruction results in failure and ultimately a cycle of low expectations and frustration that begets more failure, giving rise to this vicious cycle, contributing to in-school and post-school failure for a disproportionate number of African American students.

The overrepresentation of African American students with disabilities in special education is coupled with an underrepresentation in college attendance (Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2000). Research suggests this is related to the nurturing social and cultural capital in relation to college, including social and economic stratifications that exist in society in relation to race and disability; understanding the disability entitlement law; and facilitating the selection of a college with resources and demographics that match students' social, economic, and emotional needs (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002).

Although much has been done to curtail this overrepresentation, I argue that the possibility of overrepresentation rest on particular assumptions about culture and social justice. The issues surrounding overrepresentation are multi-faceted. Researchers have not agreed on how to measure overrepresentation, nor why it continues to exist to this extent. Research in overrepresentation has a long way to go in terms of ensuring African

American students with LD have the envisioned possibilities for themselves beyond high school.

### **African American Student Experiences in Higher Education**

Researchers indicate that strong relationships with faculty are crucial to student success at college (Peele-Eady, Nasir, & Pang, 2007). Faculty/ staff relationships are positively correlated with student satisfaction with college (Astin, 1984, 1999), academic achievement (Austin, 1993; Terenzini & Wright, 1987), and retention (Stoecker, Pascarella & Wolfle, 1988). Although some investigations suggests that relationships with faculty are especially important to the success of minority students (Braddcock & McPartland, 1988), studies indicate that African Americans are often unable to form strong relationships with faculty members (Eimers & Pike, 1996; Flemming, 1984; Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995; Nettles, 1991; Schwitzer, Griffen, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999).

African American students often perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive and experience a disconnect (Fries- Britt & Turner, 2002). Cultural insensitivity include making stereotypical comments about African Americans, such as generalizing students' opinions in class and failing to acknowledge and incorporate African American perspectives into their curricula (Feagin, Vera, Imani, 1996). Consequently, African Americans are hesitant to approach faculty for classroom help (Schwitzer, et al., 1999) and may be more apt to seek academic help from family, friends, or academic counselors that are minorities than White faculty (Burrell & Trombley, 1983; Guiffrida, 2005; Sanchez, et al., 1992, Suen, 1993).

## **African American students with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education**

The transition to post-secondary education for African American students with LD involves negotiating a new and more stressful educational environment (Henderson, 2001). Post-secondary institutions have the responsibility to provide an environment for optimum academic success for students admitted with disabilities. African American students with LD face numerous obstacles in their efforts to become successful college students (Young and Gerber, 1998). Researchers indicate that African American students with LD often struggle with asking for accommodations when entering college until they experience academic difficulty or failure (Fries-Brett, & Turner, 2001). Further studies indicate that peers may question their academic ability and integrity when basic accommodations are in place for African American students with LD (Bowe, 1992; Coughlin, 1997). Additionally, African American students may be reluctant to self-disclose their disabilities to faculty of fear of being labeled incompetent or seeking unwarranted special treatment (Bowe, 1992). It is not until African American students with LD experience academic challenges that they begin asking for accommodations (e.g., extended time on exams, note-taking)

In summary, studies of African American learning indicate that these students have both different styles of thinking and different methods of representing information. The learning process for African American students is considering their own role in their learning for success. Attentiveness must also be paid to the social and political issues among African Americans with LD. Balancing all of this information requires skills that are flexible and culturally appropriate. Education must be found relative to the African

American student (Boykin, 1986). A student must be able to interpret and transform the information presented in order to make a schooling experience educational.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research in special education has seldom focused on race, post- secondary education issues, and the lack of programs focusing on the needs of African Americans with LD (AAUW, 1998) entering the higher education setting. Specially, a serious problem has emerged that must be address the overrepresentation of African American students in special education classrooms, a serious problem has emerged that must be addressed, students enter post- secondary classrooms. Despite a wealth of literature examining the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs (Artiles, et al, 2010; Artiles, & Zamora-Duran, 1997; MacMillan, & Reschly, 1998; Harry, 1994; Patton, 1998; Townsend, 2000) research concerning African American students with LD in higher education is scarce. There is a limited body of knowledge within the post-secondary environment setting and the special education field on the experiences and perspectives of African American students with LD entering these universities. As described in chapter two, a comprehensive review of the literature shows limited evidence of studies conducted on the perceptions and experiences of African American university students with LD.

The goal of this study is to further understand and explain the experiences of African American students with LD to bring awareness to higher education officials about student success in the university school settings. More specifically, my goal is to understand how African-American adult college students with LD succeed and discover

how they develop knowledge about themselves, the nature of their LD, and their personal and academic strengths and weaknesses, vital for success in college. My aim to achieve this goal is by telling a detailed story about the individual experiences and perceptions of African American students as they matriculate in the post-secondary setting.

### **Significance of the Study**

Because of the growing number of African American students with LD who enters post-secondary education, disability support services offices across the nation are faced with the challenges of providing more varied and specialized services (Henderson, 1999; Stodden, 2001). This study will add to the current base of knowledge and will increase awareness of issues, which are potential barriers to the educational success of African American students with LD at the university setting.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of African American college students with LD enrolled in a post-secondary institution. As part of my exploration, I also seek to understand their experiences in the k- 20 special education settings that preceded their admissions into college. It is important that African American students with LD perceive their college education as the beginning of their lifetime adventure.

I am also interested in students' perceptions of their future: What is their sense of self-efficacy? How empowered for lifetime success do they feel? The primary research interest is to identify the ways that African- American students with LD negotiate and navigate in a university setting.

Introducing a study that focuses on the success as well as the coping strategies of African- American university students with LD positions this study to respond to their academic needs through advancing awareness and increasing the inquiry related to African- American students with LD at the higher education level. The objective is to gain the information needed to facilitate and prepare students to integrate scholarship and practice in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

The central research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are the educational experiences and perceptions (k-20) of university African- American students with learning disability?
2. What factors contributed to the university success of the African American student with a learning disability?
3. How does the university African American student compensate and use identity for his or her learning disability to achieve academic goals?

### **Theoretical/ Conceptual Framework**

This study is conducted through the lens of disability theory studies, which I discuss in chapter 3. An emerging interdisciplinary field, disability studies is an academic discipline that approaches disability from an interdisciplinary perspective and uses multiple theories to define disability and understand the disability experience (Linton, 1998). I utilized the theoretical work from three foundational and rudimentary disability theories viewing disability as (a) socially constructed (Priestley, 1998), (b) part of normal human variation (Abberley, 1987), and (c) voice of the labeled (Michalko, 2002).

## **Social Construction of Disability**

Most people believe they know what disability is and is not. If one imagines the person with a disability at one end of a spectrum and people who are extremely physically and mentally capable at the other, the distinction appears to be clear (Thomas, 2003). The reality is that people with disabilities are seen as different from other human beings. However, there exists tremendous middle ground in this construct, and it's in the middle that the scheme falls apart (Abberley, 1987). Labeling that simplifies reality needs to be replaced with useful knowledge about the subjects at hand.

It is clear that society discriminates against an individual who may have an impairment (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). The power of society alone to construct a disability reveals when we consider deviations from a society's conception of a normal or acceptable body. Society causes little or no functional or physical difficulty for the person who has them. It constitutes major social disabilities (Priestley, 1998). Society fails to take into account the individual differences of people (Abberley, 1987). Thus, the social construction model recognizes that people with disabilities (i.e., physical, intellectual, psychological) are accepted as normal not abnormal or unusual (Fleischer & Zames, 2001).

## **Normal Human Variation**

Scholars in disability studies argue that each person with a disability has an equal right to freedom, dignity, non-discrimination, and laws that protect them against abuse of these rights (Abberley, 1987). Human variation is normal. It empowers all people to be able to make decisions about their lives. Disability theory is one way to help bring about

this transformational change. Humans rarely perceive all possible values for a given type of variability as being of equal status. Attitudes about differences can vary considerably, according to the society, such as people with disabilities. Status can affect many aspects of individuals' lives, including social standing and survival.

### **Voice of the Labeled**

Finally, disability theory seeks to examine commonalities in the experiences of people defined as disabled (Michalko, 2002). The theory attempts to give voice to people with disabilities, including those with cognitive or intellectual disabilities. In addition, disability theory gives voice by way of closest family members, staff, or service coordinators to persons labeled with a disability.

### **Operational Definition of Terms**

It is necessary to ensure that terminology used in research be understood and precisely defined. So that there is clarity throughout this research, the following is an explanation of terms and definitions.

The term *African American* is used to refer to anyone residing in the United States who is American from African heritage (Collier-Thomas and Turner, 1994). For consistency, the term African American will be used.

*Coping Strategies* refers to problem solving of learning strategies that permits students to confront achievable goals (Polloway, Patton, and Serna, 2005).

Wenger's (1998) definition of *identity* is useful in this report. The theorist asserts that *identity* is their engagement in the world (Wenger, 1998). The theorist extended the concept by defining identity as individuals holding multiple simultaneous identity

trajectories corresponding to communities of practice of which they are a part..

*Learning Disability* is having a disorder in one or more basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematics calculations (National Institute of Health, 199figure ). The term includes such conditions such as perceptual disabilities that affect the brain's ability to receive, process, analyze, or store information.

*Overrepresentation* is a term that addresses the percentage of students from a particular group (Meyer & Patton, 2001). Specifically, a given racial/ethnic group is *over-*represented in the specific population of a certain labeling category. Overrepresentation identifies such categories as having a greater than expected percentage of students within the total school population.

*Post-secondary* is an optional level of studying beyond what is required by educational laws. Also known as higher education, it is additional education for those who wish to obtain professional degrees or simply gain scholarly acquaintance of a particular subject (Wilds, 2000).

Schmitt, Oswald, & Gillespie (2004) define *success* as the knowledge and skills students need to develop and master specific areas of interest. In addition, *success* is completing courses at a proficient.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented an introduction to the research, which is a study of the perceived experiences of African American students with LD in the university setting. For many African American students with disabilities searching for colleges and

contacting the support service office is a very unimportant preliminary step. Although research within the emerging disability culture has grown, African American students with LD, in the post-secondary level have been, for the most part, ignored. This study exposes these students in that it will explore a new and significant area. They are African American students with LD attending college, who have been marginalized from society even prior to acquiring their disability. The study points to a specific need for investigating the experiences of African American post-secondary students with LD. The impact of their voice regarding their coping and learning strategies as a college student is the focal point of this study.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Related Literature

#### **Introduction**

Presently, students with LD are the fastest growing populations of students enrolling in colleges and universities (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). Since 1985, among first generation full-time freshmen who reported having any disability, the percentage of those with LD doubled from 15 % to 32% (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002). Currently, nearly one-third of all university freshmen with disabilities report having LD (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002). Despite the countless bodies of literatures related to students with LD, in the post- secondary setting, there is a lack of research regarding African American college students with LD (Kravets & Wax, 1999; Mangrum, & Strichart, 1997; Malouf, 2000; Taymans, West, Sullivan, 2000).

In this chapter, previous work published in the literature pertaining to students in special education within the post-secondary setting is discussed. I specifically highlight the participants within the study (i.e., number and ethnicity), settings, and the methodology used throughout the study. The following key term is used within the literature review. *Learning Disabilities*, which I discuss in detail later, is used as a proper noun and is capitalized for the purposes of two interlocking agendas. The first agenda is to theorize the emerging field of disability studies by putting its core issues into contact with adjacent fields of cultural studies and critical race studies. I use the term —*Earning Disability*” as a force to ask how the theories of most influential critical and cultural thinkers advance disability studies for minority groups specifically. The second agenda

frames a discussion from the perspective of identity among African American students. This type of identity draws from the experiences of African American students in order to provide insight into their connections with disability, race, family, communication, and college survival/success. African American students with LD may challenge those identities, seeking greater freedom and mobility in the social world. My objective here is to demonstrate how disability studies transform basic assumptions about identity, politics, and social injustice among African American students.

In this review of literature, I discuss empirical and non-empirical sources that contributed to understanding the experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of university students with LD. The articles represent a broad range of works spanning many fields, such as anthropology, education, and education statistics. The goal in this review is to determine the extent of the literature related to the academic experiences of African American students with LD who are enrolled in college and university settings. I sought to answer two major questions:

1. What are the experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of university students with Learning Disabilities?
2. To what extent have researchers investigated the experiences of African American students with a Learning Disability at the post- secondary level?

### **Search Process**

Educational databases, Pro Quest, PSY Info, and ERIC database of educational periodicals were searched for the period 1980- 2009. These electronic search engines provided information on the original article, which included abstracts, procedures, and citations. Full text articles that discussed education achievement of students with LD in

higher education, and learning styles of African American students specifically, and cultural/ ethnic influences on school performance were selected for the review. The key words used to search for research articles were *learning disabilities*, *college/ university students/ post secondary*, and *African-American students*.

### **Criteria for Selecting Studies**

A set of exclusionary criterion was determined to eliminate articles that did not meet specific standards. The first criterion mandated that each study included qualitative and/ or quantitative data regarding the academic achievement of students diagnosed with LD. A second criterion required that the study's participants were enrolled in a postsecondary school setting. An additional criterion required that the studies explored findings of various intervention models regarding college students with LD. Other specific criterion for students with LD included studies focusing on the post- secondary experiences of student's from different ethnic backgrounds and who had LD. Academic interventions used for students with LD in higher education institution environments and students' experiences with these interventions were another criteria for the selection of articles.

Each study was published in peer-reviewed journals with scientifically evidence-based practices and a forum for scholars, researchers, students, and administrators who conducted original research related to current and previous college students with LD. I included articles published between September 1983 and 2009 that included at least one student participant with an identified LD. Also, I included historical articles dating from

1976. The year 1976 was selected as a start date because of the history related to the field of LD.

### **Brief History of Learning Disability**

The field of LD, as previously mentioned, has not been recognized for very long. In fact, in the early part of the twentieth century, students with LD were often confused with students who were intellectually disabled (Lerner, 2003). However, in the mid-1900s, researchers began to consider that some students were not efficient learners. Unfortunately, it was approximately 100 years before the field of LD was clearly established in the 1970s (Kirk, 1976). Initially, individuals with such conditions were classified as having Minimal Brain Injury (MBI) (Lerner, 2003). When legislative action (PL 94- 142) was initiated, the label changed from MBI to LD and fostered a period of growth. This federal legislative action mandated that all students had the right to an education, even those with severe disabilities (e.g. students that require hospitalization).

The 1970's marked a turning point in terms of the legal rights of, attitudes toward, and understanding of the education of students with LD (Lerner, 2003). During the 1970s, The Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia and Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania cases laid the foundation upon which current special education law has been built. These cases represented successful efforts to challenge segregated, inconsistent, or nonexistent programs for educating children with disabilities. Moreover, the cases represented a legal action on behalf of an entire class of students who were disabled or exceptional learners. As the court determined in the Mills decision, the plaintiffs were eligible to "sue on

behalf of and represent all other District of Columbia residents of school age who are eligible for a free public education and who have been, or may be, excluded from such education" (Lerner, 2001, p.7).

### **Definition of Learning Disability**

To understand “Learning Disabilities”, it is essential to become familiar with the legal definition. The label “Learning Disability” has received many different definitions over the years. Definitions of LD often vary from district to district, but do tend to convey a common meaning. One factor prevailing the majority of definitions is that a neurological irregularity is present in learning disabled individuals (Bigler, et al., 1998). This means the term *Learning Disabilities* refers to instances when an individual’s achievement on individually administered standardized tests in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence (DSM-IV-TR, 2000, p. 49). Because the term comprises a broad array of problems, it is difficult to describe a typical profile, which leads to a variation among individuals (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997). For example, strengths in one area may be counterbalanced by weaknesses in another, in which case a student’s performance would indicate a discrepancy in an academic area. However, there are a number of definitions of LD used in the United States. Due to several definitions of the term LD, several problems may occur that may affect theoretical and service-delivery issues (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997).

Other definitions of LD exist among different professional organizations and state education agencies programs for school- aged children with LD and programs for the

preparation of teacher professionals. Some interpretations of the definition result in a failure to recognize the developmental nature of LD. This has led many people to regard those with LD as a homogeneous group of individuals. The wording of the “exclusion clause” in the Federal definition of LD lends itself to the misinterpretation that individuals with LD cannot have more than one disability or be from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is essential to understand and recognize LD as distinct as they might occur within the varying disability categories as well as different cultural and linguistic groups (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). The legislation requires a variety of major laws that students and their parents can use to provide entitlement within the educational system and protect their rights.

**Public Law 94-142 Definition.** Congress passed Public Law 94-142 in 1975 which is also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. In 1990 and reauthorized 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted to continue the protection for students with disabilities by providing them with special education services and safeguards in the public school system. In short, these laws define, a LD as a “disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, spell or do mathematical calculations.”

Over the years, federal and state regulators have focused on compliance with these mandates. Since IDEA 2004, there has been a much greater emphasis on improving educational results and functional outcomes for all children with disabilities in grade school. As students transition to college, federal and state laws protect these individuals

in higher educational institutions from being denied accommodations. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act provides protections for those individuals who are regarded as having a physical or mental impairment that affects a major life activity.

### **Legal Mandates in Higher Education**

**Section 504.** Section 504 guarantees that a person with a disability will not be discriminated against in any program, educational service, or activity receiving federal funds outside the K- 20 setting. This full service act prohibits discrimination in employment and requires reasonable accommodations in hiring practices, access to training and programs, and promotion policies that apply to individuals with disabilities. Auxiliary aids, such as digital records and FM systems must be provided when necessary. Ultimately, educational institutions must provide supplementary aids and services needed by the individual with a LD. Due to these mandates, there are a growing number of students arriving at college with LD (Henderson, 2001).

**Americans with Disabilities Act.** In addition to Section 504 regulations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is the civil rights guarantee for persons with disabilities in the United States. It provides protection from discrimination for individuals based on disabilities. In its current form, the bill was amended and signed into law on September 25, 2008 and is now known as —ADA Amendments Act of 2008” (ADAAA). The ADAAA expands the protections of the original ADA to include more individuals with less severe impairments. Less severe impairments includes adults that are classified as using a wheelchair or had used another special aid for 6 months or

longer, unable to perform one or more functional activities or had a selected condition such as autism, cerebral palsy, or intellectual disabilities.

The new ADAAA makes important revisions to the definition of “disability” to more broadly encompass impairments that substantially limit a major life activity. Changes also clarify coverage of impairments that are episodic or in remission that substantially limit a major life activity, such as epilepsy or posttraumatic stress disorder. The new amendments took effect January 1, 2009. In the next section, I analyze, summarize, and synthesize published research studies related to students with LD in the post-secondary education setting.

### **Frameworks for Reporting Summary of Studies**

I conducted this literature review by adapting the McDougall (1998) framework to address the summary of studies and findings related to academic interventions, experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of all university students with LD. Using this framework helped to report descriptive data and findings about procedural and outcome variables. This review of literature includes 20 out of 30 pooled research-related articles (see **Table 1**).

### **University Students with Learning Disabilities**

Statistics suggest that university students with LD are most likely to request academic accommodations and services from the university (U.S. Department of Education, Contexts of Postsecondary Education, in *The Condition of Education*, 2003). In the last decade, the population of undergraduate students self-identified as LD has reached 2 percent of the total U.S. undergraduate population (U.S. Department of

Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). The percent of African American students with LD is 1.2 percent, compared to 5.8 percent of White students with LD, and 5.8 Latino students with LD (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Students have their own experiences while studying in college. For the student with LD, these experiences can be different and at times intense. The literature in this area suggests that these events range from getting to class on time, embarrassment from an inability to complete simple tasks, such as reading a library book, to an inability to hear a fire alarm (Fairbanks, 1992). Other studies indicate that students with LD attend to this by pretending that they are able to complete a task, but reject opportunities for assistance (Cox and Klas, 1996). Similarly, others cope by using humor to put themselves and/or others down (Bailey, 1990). In contrast, the more positive ways utilized to cope with LD include use of study and/or support groups (Cowen, 1988). This section of the review discusses the components of 20 studies regarding students with LD and interventions that influenced student learning in post-secondary settings.

### **Participants**

**Number.** Participants in these studies were university students enrolled in a public two or four year institution. In the twenty studies identified during the initial search process, 1,077 total students were identified as a university student with LD, and another 1,210 students were identified as university students without LD. Two studies did not identify the number of participants (Dowrick et al., 2005; Madus et al., 2003).

Most participants in each study were in transition programs available to them

through their secondary school. This may have affected the outcomes around their academic adjustment as a college student with LD. Because many participants were still attending secondary school each day, most lived with their families and were not attending college part- and/ or full-time. Knowledge of participants college education and credentials are important preparation for the advancement of disability literature. Despite the number of participants represented in each study, there continues to be a lack of full-time students with LD represented in the literature.

**Ethnicity.** A total of 71% ( $n= 12$ ) of the reviewed studies did not identify the ethnicity of participants. One study reported that all student participants were Caucasian (Barga, 2006). Only four studies actually reported the ethnicity of participants (Hartman-Hall and Haaga, 2002; Reaser et al., 2007, Ruban et al., 2003; Trainin and Swanson, 2005). Three of the four studies identified 32 African Americans with LD out of 179 participants. Although one study (Ruban et al., 2003) identified 50 out of 150 students as African American, it is unknown if these students were students with or without LD. Based on the few number of African American students in each study, it is clear that African Americans with LD are underrepresented.

This lack of participation limits the ability of researchers to generalize data from African Americans and may ultimately contribute to the presence of disparities in this population. The lack of African American participants in research is often attributed to a variety of barriers resulting in investigators' difficulties in recruitment and retainment of minority subjects (Paul, 2003). For example, perceptions of trust and mistrust of academic institutions were found to be a central barrier to recruitment (Dancy, Wilbur,

Talashak, Bonner, & Barnes-Boyd, 2004). These concerns highlight the need to develop culturally appropriate, effective recruitment strategies. Such strategies may need to address factors such as a lack of minority investigators and mistrust, which are well established barriers to participation (Paul, 2003).

### **Settings**

Eight studies did not indicate the setting of their research. Six of the studies explained that their procedures were administered within the university setting. One study explained that the researchers used campus offices occupied by university support personnel to complete the research (Butler, 1998). Three studies mailed responses to each participant (Heiman, 2006; Heiman and Precel, 2003; Ruban et al., 2003). Classroom observations were not used as part of the setting in each study. Without the use of classroom observations, it is difficult to collect data, which can be analyzed and seek answers to the research question(s). Using descriptive data provides an account of classroom behavior and interaction without making an effort to judge these events as good or bad, right or wrong, effective or ineffective. Multiple data sources are required to describe the experiences of college students with LD. Qualitative methods were lacking within each study I reviewed. The use of qualitative methods are pivotal in that they can result in an increased understanding of the research question(s) (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006) and the independent variables that is manipulated by the researcher.

### **Independent Variables**

There were five studies that did not use independent variables (Barga, 1996; Denhart, 2008; Dowrick et al., 2005; Getzel and Thoma, 2008; and Stage and Milne,

1996). One study did not report the use of an independent variable (Madaus et al., 2003). Another study used a computer-based matching task to review the phonological rehearsal and visual scanning of letters (Shafir and Siegel, 1994). Butler's (1998) independent variable was self-regulation with the use of a Strategic Content Approach. This study investigated the efficacy of an instructional model design. Four studies used various measurements such as, open-ended interview questions (Barga, 2006; Butler, 1998; Denhart, 2008; Trainin & Swanson, 2005) to describe students' attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and academic abilities. The remaining 14 (or 70%) studies identified independent variables in surveys and questionnaires (Butler, 1998; Cowen, 1998; Hartman-Hall and Haaga, 2002; Heiman, 2006; Heiman and Kariv, 2004; Heiman and Precel, 2003; Kirby et al., 2008; Reaser et al., 2007; Ruban et al., 2003; Shafir and Siegel, 1994; Trainin and Swanson, 2005; Vogel and Adelman, 1992, Wilson and Lesaux, 2001; and Worden and Nakamura, 1982). These types of independent variables are not effective when understanding the voices of students with LD, especially African American students. For example, the independent variables lacked rich descriptions, depth of describing, understanding, and explaining the complex dynamic picture of the study and the context in which activities occur. It was difficult to construct or develop theories or conceptual frameworks.

To provide high quality education for students with disabilities, the field of special education must have a foundation of high quality research. Such research provides evidence that practices are effective. High quality research should help teachers, supervisors, parents, policymakers, and researchers separate teaching practices that have a

strong record of effectiveness from those practices that have little or no evidence. This research should also provide an understanding of factors in school systems, classrooms, and society that influence how well “evidence-based” practices work in the real world. It should allow us to describe the contexts in which teaching and learning occur, as well as the situations in which individuals live, work, and apply the skills they have learned.

Several studies show high academic failure in students with LD in the university setting. Specifically, several researchers used scores and percentages to collect data and qualitative evidence to reveal academic performances across time in students’ university/college experiences (Butler, 1998; Cowen, 1998; Kirby et al., 2008; Reaser et al., 2007; Ruban et al., 2003; Wilson & Lesaux, 2001). For example, in one study, academic failure was three times higher than in the non learning-disabled group (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). Another study reported students with disabilities experienced slightly higher academic stress than students without LD (Heiman, 2006). In addition, a second study discussed the significant difference between students with and without LD in the areas of motivation, self-regulated learning strategies, and academic achievement (Ruban et al., 2003). Also, a third study reported that the difference in phonological processing skills is evident with students with LD compared to a group matched on age and education without a disability (Wilson & Lesaux, 2001). Of the several studies reviewed, current data lacked evidence regarding how students with LD maintain a successful postsecondary experience when entering an accredited institution of higher education. Moreover, the literature lacked a response to the change made to the independent variable. The value of the dependent

variable is caused by and depends on the value of the independent variable (e.g., Story comprehension and recall might depend on stimulus stories).

### **Dependent Variables**

A dependent variable is an outcome variable whose values are related to the values of the independent variable. Of the 20 dependent variables identified in this review, seven studies addressed the investigation of specific academic tasks. For example, task performance, academic achievement abilities, story comprehension and information recall were included in the 20 variables throughout the studies. Three studies examined students' experiences and perceptions with coping experiences (Denhart, 2008; Heiman and Kariv, 2004; Stage and Miline, 1996). In her analysis of students with LD in higher education, Denhart (2008) found that there was an overwhelming reluctance among participants to request or use accommodations. However, the participants identified the LD specialist as crucial for their success. Thus, LD specialists, the services they provide, and the strategies they teach, maybe key components for the success of these students. According to the results reported from the interviews in Denhart's study, students felt misunderstood, perceived as lazy, or attempting to cheat (Denhart, 2008). Denhart further addressed other studies that focused on barriers to education and strategies for overcoming them. Many participants expressed facing barriers regarding their different way of thinking from the mainstream, which caused them to be misunderstood. Unfortunately, none of the eleven participants in this study were African American students. The few voices of African American students with LD were clearly not represented. To develop a comprehensive picture of the experiences of these college

students, further research is needed. In addition, the choice of how the data are analyzed affects the number of subjects and the way researchers measure the dependent variables.

### **Measurement of Dependent Variables**

There were a variety of measures used in the reviewed articles. There were over 16 measurements used in the review of studies. Academic and behavioral performances were expressed through frequencies, raw scores, and means. Six studies used broad qualitative research methods to measure students' perceptions, experiences, and coping strategies (Barga, 2006; Cowen, 1988; Denhart, 2008; Dowrick et al., 2005; Getzel and Thoma, 2008; Madaus, Scott, and McGuire, 2003; Stage and Milne, 1996). Six research studies used mean scores on standardized tests to measure the academic progress in reading and coping strategies (Hartman- Hall and Haaga, 2002; Reaser et al., 2007, Heiman, 2006; Kirby et al., 2008, Trainin and Swanson, 2005; Worden and Nakamura, 1982). Standard deviations were also used in five of the studies reviewed (Hartman- Hall and Haaga, 2002; Heiman, 2006; Kirby et al., 2008; Reaser et al., 2007; and Trainin and Swanson, 2005). Raw scores were another form of interpreting the measures used in several studies (Butler, 1998; Shafir and Siegal, 1994; Vogel and Adelman, 1992). As noted in the Barga (2006) and Denhart (2008) studies, African-American students were not accounted for in the percent of the total number of participants. These experiences are of primary importance and the best source of understanding the deeper structure and common elements of their experience, while valuing the uniqueness of each person.

The experiences and perceptions African American college students with LD deviate from the societal norm. Getzel and Thoma (2008) report that among the

experiences of college students with disabilities, self-determination is important in the higher education settings. Getzel and Thoma (2008) used purposive sampling to select focus group participants who receive supports and services related to their disability and who were identified as having self-determination skills by service providers in the postsecondary education setting. There were 34 students involved in the study. Thirty-five percent (35%) were African American students. This research study used personal communication (e.g., self report) as the primary source of data on self-determination. The researcher's objective was to gain an understanding of a phenomenon from the participant's perspective. Results from the study indicated that self-determination skills or behaviors in higher education settings are critical for academic success.

In their research exploring a student's willingness to seek help for their LD, Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) described how a student views his or her LD may be an important factor in whether the student will persevere in seeking help after receiving negative responses. For instance, these researchers investigated whether students holding more negative perceptions of their LD reported a willingness to seek help after reading hypothetical situations in which a student received a negative response to a request for help. In this study, the researchers discovered that there were no differences in reported willingness to seek help associated with perceptions of academic, cognitive, or social abilities (p. 272).” Students receiving services rated themselves lower on scholastic competence than did students not using services. Out of the 86 participants in the study, 4.7% of participants identified themselves as African American students.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this literature review was to assess data sources, methodologies, results, and conclusions of previous studies in preparation for work with African American students with LD in higher education. The contribution of this literature review is focus on the voices, experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of underrepresented African American students with LD in the post- secondary setting. Although most studies were of high quality, the voices of African American students with LD were neglected. For example, many researchers did not report information about the participants' demographics (i.e., ethnicity, race) and how they were selected.

This literature review demonstrates that research includes very little participation of African American students with LD in higher education. I argue that African American students with LD have to contend with discrimination that arises from social and political oppression as minorities and coping with LD while matriculating as a college student. African American students with LD who are enrolled in post secondary institutions are often asked to academically adjust in school. For example, African American students reported feeling alienated and hyper-visible due to their race, and perceiving a hostile racial climate on campus, which has been associated with lower academic adjustment, performance, and college persistence (Allen, 1988; Baldwin, Brown, & Rackley., 1990; Hughes, 1987). These students are sharply at odds with the double jeopardy of being a minority and having a disability. To make matters worse, as with the public school system, post secondary institutions do not meet the needs of this diverse population.

In summary, the majority of the literature on the experiences, perceptions, and

coping strategies with university students with diagnosed LD have been collected through the use of surveys or retrospective interviews. The studies in this review did not identify a single set of teaching techniques likely to meet the needs of adults with LD. There is a need to add to the field's knowledge of student coping strategy by conducting a study in order to identify strategies that are related to successful experiences.

These studies lack the collection of data from African American students with LD in the post-secondary setting. The voices of African American students are needed within this area of research to address the importance of higher education officials self-awareness regarding issues of ethnicity and disability. Inquiry in this area of research remains very much separate and unequal when it comes to the experiences and perceptions of African American students.

Despite a wealth of literature examining the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs (Artiles, 2010; Artiles, & Zamora-Duran, 1997; MacMillan, & Reschly, 1998; Harry, 1994; Patton, 1998; Townsend, 2000) research concerning African American students with LD in higher education is scarce. In particular, the paucity of research regarding the experiences and perceptions of African American students with LD entering post-secondary schools is of concern.

The findings and insights generated by respondents in several studies within the literature review provide a brief glimpse of the postsecondary experiences and perceptions of African American students with LD. The voices of African American students in post-secondary settings with LD have been silenced for too long. Researchers of African Americans with LD in the postsecondary settings must enhance and contribute

to the development of the voices, experiences and perceptions of these students, which directly affect their lives. The literature review served as a beginning step in an agenda building process to address the experiences and perceptions of African American university students with LD.

### **Benefits of Research in the area of African American students with Learning Disabilities**

Disabilities Developing skills and practices in college enables students to become more independent adults. As African American students with LD transition from high school and access higher education, they must self-advocate and communicate with their professors. Increasing an understanding of their disability and how it affects their learning are important pieces of information necessary to share with faculty in order to implement appropriate accommodations. A closer examination of this literature review found three significant advantages of additional research in the post-secondary setting with African-American students with LD.

**Voices of the Underrepresented.** Inclusion is a key issue for many young African American students with LD. Many feel isolated at college and often the expectations are lower regarding their future (Wilson, 2004). The lack of research and programs focusing on the needs of African American students with LD in the post-secondary setting places them at risk for failure and for dropping out of school. Although efforts to advance services provided to students of diverse backgrounds have been made (Guillory, 2000), research must continue to explore ways to address this growing problem of the lack of literature that gives voice to African American students with LD in higher

education.

**Teacher Disposition.** It is critical that instructors within the post-secondary setting do not silence conversations about race and racism, but explore them when examining educational outcomes of African American students (Williams & Winters, 2005), particularly those with LD. Higher education officials must critically analyze important issues such as race, ethnicity, culture, and disability in how these crucial concepts shape the learning experience for African American students. The discussion should be more than covering the dialogue of race across curricular and or instructional topics (Cross, 2005). Part of this learning requires higher education instructors to make a cultural connection with their students.

**Strategies for Success.** There are growing numbers of African American students experiencing school failure (Ford, Obiakor, & Patton, 1995). Being keen to the needs of African American students with LD will help higher education officials accommodate African American students in the learning environment. Providing resources and recommendations to higher education instructors on how to instruct and mentor African American college students with LD sets this work apart from other disability resources and initiates a conversation on college pedagogy. This work provides optimal conditions and environments for the success of African American students with LD.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the methodology and procedures adopted within this study are explained. This chapter will also discuss the significance of the methodology used throughout this study. The bulk of the studies in the literature review used quantitative methods to understand the experiences of college students with LD. Educational agencies and private sector organizations are becoming increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of these types of methods. Qualitative studies began to form the basis for the evaluation of many of these programs or particular components of these programs. One of the strengths of qualitative research methods is that they are exploratory and flexible. The results of a quantitative survey, using closed-ended questions, provide programs with information about characteristics of the population on a set of predetermined questions. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to ask questions of different people in different ways and to modify the questions and data collection methods to explore topics that were not initially deemed important.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) describe qualitative research as an umbrella phrase that refers to multiple research strategies that share certain characteristics, with data that are "rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures" (p. 2). Qualitative research is naturalistic (Royse, 1999) because it involves observing participants in their natural environment. The researcher is the main

data-gathering instrument. In addition, the researcher uses tacit (intuitive or felt) knowledge (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research enables us to construct meaning from a person's written or spoken words, and does not normally include any numerical measurements (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through the use of qualitative research, researchers become familiar with the complexity of human experiences (Creswell, 1994).

Compared to other qualitative research methodologies (e.g., grounded theory, ethnography, action research), case study research involves an attempt to describe relationships that exist in reality, what people perceive it to be. Reality can be captured in detail by an observer-researcher, with the analysis of more variables than is typically possible in experimental and survey research. The primary difference between case study research and other qualitative research methodologies is the individual case and not the entire population of cases. However, the focus is not on generalization, but on understanding the complexity of the case. To this end, case study research is an appropriate choice for this study because it seeks to investigate a topic in depth, but also because this is an area in which little prior research has been done.

### **Case Study Research: The Context**

#### **Definition of Case Study Research**

The term "case study" has multiple meanings. It can be used to describe a unit of analysis (e.g. a case study of a particular organization) or to describe a research methodology. Though the term "case study" is familiar to most people, there is little agreement on just what constitutes case study research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). Some of the confusion stems from some of its uses; the

meaning of the term “case study” has overlapped substantially with that of other notable methodology such as ethnography, grounded theory, and life history (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000). Many researchers have advanced definitions for qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). For example, Merriam’s (1998) definition is “Qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit.”

In selecting case study research methodology, I selected an appropriate issue for investigation; an issue that is crucial to understand the overall perspective from which the study is designed and completed. With this in mind, my philosophy and ideology are important because they express my beliefs about the ways in which the inquiry should be gathered, analyzed, and used. In the following sections, I discuss the philosophical and ideological assumptions within qualitative research and how these assumptions relate to the inquiry I am conducting within case study research.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions frame what the researcher believes about the nature of reality or ontology (what we know to be true) and the nature of knowledge or epistemology (what is believed to be true). Ontological and epistemological presuppositions are associated with three forms of thought: postpositivist, interpretivist, and constructivist approaches. As noted by Padgett (2004), these philosophical approaches are a “vast middle ground” (p. 5) that exists where researchers, those in professional schools such as education, are moving “comfortably within and among various discourses” (p. 7). In the following section and for the purposes of this research, I

discuss using the interpretative approach to review the underlying principles of qualitative research and case study methodology through the field of special education.

**Interpretive Approach.** While conducting research with an interpretive approach, "the social scientist must collect facts and data describing not only the purely objective, publicly observable aspects of human behavior, but also the subjective meaning this behavior has for the human subjects themselves" (Lee, 1991, p. 347). Using an interpretive approach provides an understanding of "the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). Several interpretive researchers assume that reality is socially constructed (Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2001; Walsham, 1995). The interpretive approach is characterized by interaction between the researcher and the participants (Mingers, 2001). The researcher's interpretations play a key role in this kind of study bringing "such subjectivity to the forefront, backed with quality arguments rather than statistical exactness" (Garcia & Quek, 1997, p. 459).

Case study research can be congruent with an interpretivist paradigm that considers reality a social construct that emerges from the way in which individuals and groups interact and experience the world (Creswell, 2007). I identify myself as an interpretive researcher because I am concerned with making sense of the world and shared meanings of intersubjectivity rather than objectivity. I am able to increase an understanding of the critical, social and organizational issues related to African American college students with LD. As an interpretive researcher, I operate under the assumption that access to reality is only possible through social constructions such as language and shared

meanings.

### **Ideological Perspectives**

This section is not meant to be an exhaustive review or critique of the various ideological assumptions, nor is it meant as a critique of each ideological assumption. Instead, it provides a basic introduction to the complexities of several perspectives to assess the impact aimed at understanding the experiences of African American students with LD in higher education.

Different forms of qualitative ideologies exist and the design of research within each has distinct features (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2007), several ideological perspectives exist within qualitative research: the postmodern, feminist theories, critical theory and critical race theory, queer theory, and disability theories are a few that are frequently applied in the field of education. In the following discussion, I explain two ideologies related to this research; critical race theory and disability theory.

**Critical Race Theory.** Critical Race Theory (CRT) contends that the perspectives of the discriminated-against must be better understood by the larger society and that the law should look not to wrongs of wrongdoers, but to helping those who have been victims of discrimination (Antonio, 1990; Creswell, 2007). It is essential that society must understand the experiences and responses of people who are regularly mistreated because of the color of their skin.

Drawing on critical theory, students with LD are understood as an informal construction, a fictional other to an equally constructed norm. Although race and disability do not have biological meaning, they do have social meaning. The similarities

and differences in how people with disabilities are aggregated and disaggregated, dichotomized and stigmatized and denied attributes valued in the culture helps to understand the intersections between race, ethnicity, and disability.

**Disability Theory.** Research using the lens of disability theory focuses on the environmental, cultural, and social barriers that exclude people with a disability from mainstream society and prioritizes the knowledge and experience that people with disabilities endure (Oliver, 1995). Within case study research, the core assumption of disability theory is that the inquirer will proceed collaboratively so as to not further marginalize the participants as a result of the inquiry (Oliver, 1995). In this sense, the participants may help design questions, collect data, analyze information, or reap the rewards of the research. The disability theory provides a voice for participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives.

This assumption adds to the commitment in advancing African American students with LD political struggles, by seeking to give voice to their experience and acting generally to eradicate disabling barriers in society. Nonetheless, disability theory has been criticized for over simplifying differences in the experience of oppression within the disabled population. The aspiration to ensure researcher accountability to person with disabilities raises questions (i.e., who controls what the research will be about and how it will be carried out, how far have we come in involving people with disabilities in the research process?) about the nature of control and what core ideas or theoretical perspective are implemented.

Considering the previously explained philosophical and ideological assumptions, I situate myself as an interpretive researcher driven by critical race and disability theories.

These frameworks or worldviews were selected because exploring the experiences of African American students with LD provides powerful storytelling, challenging the majority of literature in the special education within the postsecondary setting. Given that this study will focus on an issue that has had little investigation, the purpose of using case study research is to provide a detailed description of the experiences of African American students with LD in higher education. I discuss additional ways this research confront biases in case study research in the following section.

### **Case Study Ethics, Validity, and Reliability**

Ethics, validity, and reliability are important considerations for evaluating the quality of case study research and its trustworthiness. Studies in education must be rigorously conducted and present insights that ring true to the readers if they are to have effect on practice (Merriam, 2001). Although the nature of case study research means that issues of ethics, validity, and reliability take different forms, there still needs to be an accounting of the dependability, trustworthiness, and credibility of all parts of the research process, including design, data collection, and interpretation.

A major concern in case study research reflects ethical considerations; what Guba and Lincoln (1981) refer to as “unusual problems of ethics.” For example, interviews with participants may not accurately reflect the case. Researchers who choose to use case study methodology do well to remember that although they do not spend years observing the particular case, they quickly become participants in that case. My presence may influence

results and my prior experiences and/ or upbringing may bias them initially toward observing or recording certain phenomena. Therefore this subjectivity was honestly acknowledged, as is recommended in ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research. In addition, I became concerned with preventing participants from being harmed, protecting their anonymity and privacy, not deceiving them, and securing their informed consent.

**Validity.** Another key concept relevant to a discussion in case study research is that of validity. Validity is defined as the extent to which the findings in an experiment can be applied to other individuals and settings beyond those that were studied (Maxwell, 2005). It allows for some level of generalization in qualitative research. This position is taken because of the interpretive nature of case study analysis and my role as the investigator in data collection and analysis. Merriam (2009) states that oftentimes, —the researcher is left to rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout the inquiry”. This was handled by simply describing my role in the research report and examining periodically what my role is and what type of influence may result from it. My position as the researcher is discussed later in this chapter. I became aware of and set controls for known sources of error (or threats) such as positions, emotions, attitudes, and opinions. These threats are important to control due to their ability to render the findings of the study invalid.

**Reliability.** Reliability, on the other hand, has to do with minimizing the errors and biases in a study. I focused on decreasing errors and biases by conducting this research so another investigator could repeat the procedures and arrive at the similar

conclusions. Documentation of the procedures is the method I used so other investigators can repeat the structure of the study.

## **Design of the Study**

### **Methodological Framework**

According to Yin (1994), the case study approach is acceptable when the study is conducted by the researcher to explore the "how" and/or the "why" of a research question(s). Yin (1994) also reports that a case study is designed to "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (p. 13)." In addition to using the case study methodology, this research was guided by an ethnographic approach. The use of this approach was to learn from the participant, rather than simply studying participant's behaviors in context. For example, I designed ethnographic interviews to elicit responses from the participants that reflected their "insider" perspective. As a result, I made a concerted effort to eradicate preconceived notions about the participant's motivations, actions, thoughts, and feelings. I recognized and set aside personal perspectives and bias, while actively listening to, recording, analyzing, and reporting the participant's journey from the inside out. Thus, the key to good case study research is counteracting these tendencies by looking at the data in many divergent ways.

### **Description of the Case**

**Setting.** Students were recruited through Accessibility Resource Center (ARC), at the University of South Western; a pseudonym is used to mask the identity of the actual location. Observations for this study were conducted in various college classrooms

throughout the university. For example, one of the classrooms is a large lecture hall (see **Figure 3.0**). This large room, used for instruction, has a capacity of approximately one-hundred students. This particular lecture hall has a pitched floor, so that those in the rear are elevated higher than those in front of them, giving them visual access to the instructor. The room features audio-visual equipment to aid instruction of the large population. A microphone and speakers are present to help the instructor amplify their voice and projection screens are installed for visual presentations.

**Participants.** After approval from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research with human subjects, 128 undergraduate students that self-identify as a student with LD and receiving academic accommodations were sent an e-mail from the director of ARC requesting participation in the study (see **Appendix A**). A flyer was created and displayed throughout the department soliciting participation (see **Appendix B**). Each participant was presented with an informed consent form at the time of introduction (see **Appendix C**). The participant's initialed all pages of the informed consent and signed the last page. The study is voluntary, so participants are those students who express an interest in involvement. In addition, participants completed a demographic questionnaire, an adapted version of the Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey (see **Appendix D**) (Holcomb-McCoy, 1999). The demographic questionnaire consist of personal information including age, gender, ethnic background, and level of education.

Based on the pool of 128 students, 18 students self-identify as African American with LD and obtaining academic and testing accommodations from ARC. From the 18

students, three African American male students agreed to participate in the study. Table 2.0 describes the demographic information of each participant. Real names of participants were replaced with their selected pseudonym. Each student self-identified and established accommodations during their first year at the university. At the time of the study, each student was registered as a full time student enrolled in university core courses. I discuss their detailed demographics individually in chapter 4.

### **Method Used to Answer the Research Questions**

The qualitative research methodology used in this study enabled me to examine the process and experiences of the participant's real life contexts in which they occur (Yin, 1994). Specially, this study relied on qualitative case study research methods. These methods facilitated an understanding of the participant's experiences and perceptions as an African American college student with LD. The key strength of the case study method involves using data sources and techniques in the data gathering process. Determining what evidence to gather and what analysis techniques to use with the data to answer the research questions is essential. The data sources for this study included classroom observations, by using descriptive field notes, ethnographic interviews, and journal analysis (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The following discussion entails how I used my data sources when conducting the study.

### **Procedure**

In order to support the validity and reliability of the findings, a variety of triangulation methods were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The three data sources included: (a) interviews with the participant; (b) observations by the researcher; and (c)

journal reflections by the participants. Each method is discussed below.

**Individual Interviews.** During pre-scheduled time frames, I interviewed each student in the ARC. Three in-depth interviews with participants for approximately thirty minutes each were conducted. Interview queries addressed the research questions pertaining to school experiences and perceptions. In addition, participants participated in interviews that discussed their life history, experiences as a college student with LD, and their reflections on being African American with LD and attending college (see **Appendix E**). For example, the first set of interview questions examined their early educational experience as it related to their disability in the K-12 setting. The second set of interview questions focused on the details of the participants' experience in the post-secondary setting. The last series of interview questions dealt with participants' understanding of their experience as a college student with a disability and being an African American student. A transcription from each interview was generated to record responses.

**Observations.** Before I began classroom observations, I asked each student to select a course that he felt comfortable being observed. The purpose of this was to gain access to a college classroom to complete observation of the student's interaction in the classroom. After the student selected a course and I obtained the professor's e-mail address, I sent the professor a notification via e-mail introducing myself, the purpose of the study, and a request to complete research observations in the classroom (see **Appendix F**). Every selected instructor replied accepting my invitation to complete the classroom observations. Written consent was established from the college instructor and

observations began during the next class session.

I used descriptive field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) during the observational period. Over the span of two months, I observed participants at least twice a week and 50 minutes per visit. My goal was to document how participants respond to the instructors' questions. In addition, I recorded any questions/ comments delivered by the participants. The main purpose of completing these observations in the course is to record how the participants during class discussions and lectures. In addition to instructional time, observations occurred before class started and during class breaks. Observations provided specific information pertaining to the participant's classroom behaviors and perceptions.

**Journal Reflection.** I collected and examined journals directly from each participant once per week for six weeks. It is essential to capture information about events in the participant's daily life. I used this data source as a form of real-time capturing. As a conventional source of data collection, I asked each participant to respond in ways they feel comfortable (i.e., writing, drawing, poems) to questions related to their learning. The purpose of this data source was to follow-up with the participant. For instance, I analyzed the participant's journal entries for what they revealed about their experiences and perceptions as an African American with LD. A retrospective examination of their journals permitted me to make meaningful connections of my observations in the classroom. The participants and I discussed their journals as well as their experiences in the classroom. This analysis provoked a depth of learning which may not be possible through any other methodological means.

## **Data Collection Analysis**

For this study, I used purposeful sampling, basing subject selection on predetermined criteria to the extent that each participant could contribute to the research study (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). The reason I used purposeful sampling is based upon “the participant is chosen because he or she is likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena the researcher is investigating” (MacMillan and Schumacher, 1997 p. 397).

Data collection and data analysis were conducted at the same time. I inductively analyzed the data, searching for relationships, concepts, and themes related to the research questions. The transcribed interviews, field notes, and documents were organized according to dates, classroom configuration, and interviews. For example, I read each transcript while simultaneously listening to the audio recording to capture crucial verbal data. I began my initial analysis with several guiding principles, which were a spiraling process that sequentially and repetitively examined preliminary findings for the purposes of guiding additional data collection and analysis (see **Figure 2**). The model helped me to develop a mental map that I used as I went along with the study. The following is an explanation of the spiral process beginning with the first step.

**Assemble the data.** The first step in the process is to assemble all of the data, converting images and other materials into descriptive forms (Gall et al., 2003). During this process, I read, annotated, and recorded each segment. Data displays were used as means of organizing and summarizing the large amounts of information so I can analyze it. Data displays in the form of matrices, tables, and the *Atlas ti* software program were

used to analyze and develop various categories for the multiple cases. Strauss and Corbin (1990) states that analysis begins with identification of the themes emerging from the raw data, a process sometimes referred to as open coding. Within this research, I used interpretational analysis. This type of analysis involved examining data to identify constructs, themes, and patterns useful to describe a given phenomenon.

**Creating Categories.** Next, I developed meaningful categories that encompassed and summarized the data. Specifically, I read through each answer several times to identify prominent themes, and then summarize the findings under interpretational headings before collating these into summary tables. The frequency of occurrence of the themes was recorded using a spreadsheet and chart paper. Gall et al (2003) suggest using a list of categories that other researchers have developed. If other categories needed to be developed, I defined the category and specified guidelines for determining whether segments are or are not instances of the category. For example, I examined each segment and coded them to reflect whether it reflects none, one, or more instances of any categories. Moreover, I recorded the degree to which the instance is present (e.g., not present, present to a moderate degree, present to a high degree). If some categories were ambiguous or contain information that could be coded, the coding system was revised and the data re-coded. It could also be the case that data are insufficient, in which case I returned to the field.

**Assigning Categories.** After meaningful categories were developed, I examined each segment and assigned a category. For example, I examined a single case for the pattern and, if it was found, I looked to see if it was found in other cases. If the pattern is

not found, the original hypothesis was re-examined. I identified and tentatively linked categories into which the phenomena observed would be grouped. The objective here was to create a preliminary framework for analysis. Words, phrases or events that appeared to be similar were grouped into the same category. These categories were gradually modified or replaced during the subsequent stages of analysis that follow. To construct categories, the data were broken down into bits of information. Merriam (1998) defines a unit of data as any meaningful (or potentially meaningful) segments of data, which can be as small as a word an informant uses to describe a feeling, or as large as several pages of field notes.

**Making Connections.** After re-examining each category, I determined how they were linked. Specifically, this step of the analysis focused on how to identify the overall pattern of results and the extent to which the observed pattern of variables matched a predicted one. This complex process was called making connections or sometimes called axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The discrete categories identified in open coding compared and combined in new ways as I began to assemble the big picture and acquire a new understanding of the data. Events contributing to the case and the results of the cases were identified and explored. During axial coding, I determined if sufficient research exists and gave participants an opportunity to approve particular aspects of the interpretation of the data they provided (Merriam, 1998).

**Member Checks.** In response to my role as the researcher, I sought after to clarify bias on my part that may influence my findings. I explicitly discussed conflicting or discrepant findings that emerged from the interviews or documents and address the

questions participants raised about my interpretation of the case. Member checks were conducted to assess the plausibility of the ethnographer's interpretations (Emerson et. al, 1995). The recognition, by members, that a researcher's conclusions are plausible reconstructions of the members' own experiences enhances the authenticity of an ethnography and helps minimize research bias (Emerson et al., 1995). The use of member checks allows the study participants to corroborate the "essential facts and evidence" presented in the case (Yin, 1994). In other words, I talked to my participants. At the final stages of my analysis, I translated the conceptual model into the story line. The write up is a rich, tightly woven account that "closely approximates the reality it represents" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 57).

### **Write-up**

Case studies were developed from the students' responses to provide a more detailed and in-depth look at the specific student experiences and perceptions. Each case study is based on composite information obtained through the study. Confidential information that would be recognizable to a student or a potential reader is not used. The final write up became a rich narrative describing each case with the findings presented in a manner that retains the focus of the research question. All contextual information conveys the most accurate picture possible. I made every attempt to reconstruct the participants' realities and portray all viewpoints.

### **Researcher Positioning**

I am aware that I entered this study with biases as a LD specialist who provides academic accommodations for these college students with LD. I am a former exceptional

student education teacher and the brother of adult student with a disability. I believe that attending college should be a choice available to any student with LD who is otherwise qualified. My experience as a special education teacher and my on-going connection to an LD college-aged student can be both a strength and a liability. It is strength because it motivates my passion to learn. Under girding this entire study is my own desire to find out how more college-aged African American students with LD are successful. I recognize that the participant and I share the same ethnic background. With this same background, I have been careful to account for my decisions with regards to which stories I share and the context in which I convey them in accurately interpreting the data.

## CHAPTER 4

### Analysis of the Data: The Results

#### **Overview**

In this chapter, a description of each participant and results from this study are explained separately. As discussed in chapter 3, direct quotations were used to offer particular compelling language and include detailed information about important or telling events, which added richness and depth to the narrative. The purpose here is to thoroughly understand the situation. While, providing academic accommodations to each participant, it is not my intentions to give them an unfair advantage, but to remove barriers that prevent them from learning and from demonstrating what they have learned. I recognize that each participant is the expert regarding his personal and academic needs and can suggest solutions. I anticipate that this research improves the exposure of African American students with LD on university campuses. Moreover, these stories add to the body of knowledge to increase communication/ awareness of faculty, staff, and administrators to facilitate discussions on the experiences, perceptions, and academic success of African-American university students with LD. The characteristics of each participant are described exclusively below.

#### **Participant Demographics**

Three male participants represented African American ancestry from the American middle class. At the time of the study, all participants were enrolled in college courses at the same university. I attribute my efforts in recruiting these participants to relationships we built over time and to the trust and generosity of these young men.

Specifically, the level of disclosure in the interviews indicated that the students trusted me enough to share their experiences that reflected both positively and negatively on themselves and their culture. The following is a brief description of each student and the nature of their educational evaluation.

### **Education Background**

**Robert.** Based on the Woodcock Johnson Revised Achievement Tests, completed in April 2007, Robert's results indicated average intelligence with patterns of learning difficulties indicating dyslexia. Robert's developmental level on numbers reversed is within the low range of scores obtained by others at his age level. Moreover, according to the report, there were achievement delays in the areas with written language. His level on basic writing skills is within the low average range of scores; however, his written expression or writing skills is comparable to that of the average individual at his age level. Robert attended public K-12 classes completing his schooling in an inclusion classroom. His recommended modifications/ accommodations were extended time on tests which have a written element, advance warning of reading assignments, and preferential seating if possible. As a junior at the university level, studying education, Robert's approved academic accommodation is double time when taking tests in an effort to help him succeed in school. Based on my interview with Robert, he is actively involved in a student Greek organization at the university. He lives at home with his parents and younger sibling.

**Fontain.** In May 2007, Fontain was enrolled as a special education student in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade at a public high school in an inclusion setting. His report states that he is

identified as a student with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). However, during one of our conversations, Fontain mentioned that he was in a twice- exceptional program, referring to students who have been identified as gifted and talented according to local school system criteria and as having a disability according to federal criteria of IDEA or Section 504. This influence might have a different level of functioning even within the same disability category. For example, Fontain's academic experiences and perceptions could vary widely from one student to the next. Specifically, twice exceptional students require more intensive services than others.

Results from Fontain's evaluation suggested difficulties with perceptual motor tasks, 'slowness' and his periodic reversal of letters in reading. The subtest scores on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 3rd. ed. (WISC III) indicated significant difficulties in the areas of visual/ motor functioning, visual decoding of information, and efficiency when performing on timed tasks. The evaluator noted that perceptual motor functioning as it relates to spelling, reading, and all forms of written expression is at 'profound deficit.' Specifically, his eye-hand coordination was significantly delayed. Although the report did not go into detail related to Fontain's giftedness, the evaluator reported the following strengths: attentive, thoughtful, participates well in class discussions, good verbal communicator, good sense of humor, and critical thinking skills in literacy. During his time in the K-12 and university setting, Fontain uses the Dragon Naturally speaking device for written assignments and extended time with the use of the computer. Furthermore, Fontain's university also converts his textbooks to an alternative format. Fontain is a sophomore studying theatre/ dance.

**Rev.** Residing with his parents and younger sibling at home, Rev attended a private school since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade by choice of his parents. Although he was diagnosed with LD, he was not in a classroom designed for inclusion. According to Rev, “the teachers made accommodations for all students.” It is suspected that he was identified as having LD when he was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. According to a very limited evaluation report, Rev’s ability in math is well below average. The evaluator suggested that Rev receives extended time on tests. At the university setting, Rev is approved for the same accommodation and he is able to use a note taker for each of his classes to obtain materials from lectures including films, guest speakers, exam reviews, etc. Rev is completing his second semester as a freshman in college and still is undecided on a degree program.

Drawing from each student’s personal perspective, as an African American labeled as having LD, I present a multiplicity of voices and images that are a representation of their lived experiences and perceptions. I convey their stories as interconnected and contingent on one another.

### **Interpretation of Data**

The data were coded into three categories related to Robert’s, Fontain’s and Rev’s experiences as African American students with LD in the post-secondary setting (see **Table 3.0**). In Table 3.0, an overview of the separate categories and themes is provided based on data analysis. Findings from the study are addressed in categories in order of the research questions (RO).

**RO 1: What are the educational experiences and perceptions (k-20) of university African- American students with a Learning Disability?**

**Category I: Experiences and Perceptions**

**In the corner.** During one of the interviews, each participant responded to my question, how would describe your experience in school as a student with a disability? Fontain expressed, ~~throughout~~ throughout elementary, I had teachers who just put me on the side of the room because they would be like, oh well he's not smart" (F, m, p. 1, line 23-24). While I was interviewing him, you could sense the frustration of being isolated from the rest of his peers and the classroom community. His voice fluctuated as he described incidents that stressed him while in the special education classroom. He explained that special education was a barrier that kept him from his friends. Fontain goes on to say, ~~I~~ I had problems expressing myself, and a lot of times I would be put in the corner and was told to read like a picture book or something like that" (F, m, p. 2, line 27-28). After we completed the interview, Fontain wanted to go back to our conversation of being in special education as a grade school student. He explained, ~~I~~ I wanted to be treated the same way as others."

Robert explained, ~~while~~ while everyone was in language class, I was alone, away from the other kids in the class where it was kind of pointing out my dyslexia" (RS, m, p. 1-2, line 20-24). Robert goes on to say that everyone in the class would ask him, ~~why~~ why do you go over there." He responded to his peers by saying, ~~I~~ I just thought that I got signed for it." After a much respected pause, Robert continues his discussion with me by talking about how he would improve his different practices regarding his grade school

experiences. He noted, ~~my~~ grade experience, I felt like an outsider; I remember not paying attention to it at first, but the kids were like why are you sitting over there” (RS, m, p. 6, line 126- 127). While talking with Robert, he conveyed, ~~I~~wanted to see myself as normal.” He continued by saying some of his peers in grade school were upset that he was in the same room or group he was in.

Rev had a slightly different experience with being in the corner. Since he attended a private school, there weren’t any special education procedures. His classroom environment had a small population of students, so his teacher did not remove him from the group. However, Rev explained that he removed himself. ~~I~~knew that I had to place myself away from friends that I knew that would distract me during class and I could distract them” (R, m, p.4, line 82-83), Rev explained. Rev would mentally escape from in from other students in the classroom in an attempt to disengage from classroom distractions. When I completed a member check with Rev, he voiced that he sat next to the teacher so the teacher could watch over him. His desire was to remove himself from the source of stress so he could have the necessary relief to concentrate.

**Self-Determination.** All participants spoke of their academic success as a college student. One area that impacts their success as a college student with LD is self-determination. Robert commented during the final interview, ~~You~~ really have to believe in yourself, because without that then you not going to get anywhere; you can’t use your Black card to your advantage to succeed in front of others” (F, m, p. 5, line 99-109). Robert continued by explaining that, ~~as~~ a student with a disability, I try to turn my

thinking around.” I later understood this to mean that he must work harder to do well and not allow his LD to interfere with his academic pursuit and accomplishments.

Rev explained that, “You need to want to do it; that’s where people fall off” (RS, m, p. 4, line 87-90). Rev continues to say, “If I am paying to go to school, I’m going to make something out of it; I’m not going to school to fail; I’m going to pay to do something with my life and go and achieve my goals and my dreams that I want to do” (R, m, p.5, line 91-93). While talking with Rev, there was a sense of the challenge and promise of personal academic fulfillment. Rev also talked about his ability to gain confidence from his achievement, while recognizing his “failures and mistakes”.

Fontain discussed the need to have fun with friends first before he completes homework. “I always make sure I have time for my friends, it’s a big, big part and I promised myself it is a lot easier for me to go home and just pound out homework; when I get out of class, I go straight to the library and try to focus right there then get all my assignments done” (F, m, p. 4, line 79-82). In addition to Fontain’s comments, there was this take charge approach or ownership through his academics and the role of a successful student. It appears that Fontain has realized that he must plan to spend time outside of each class on homework and/ or assignments in college in order to be successful.

## **RO 2: What factors contributed to the university success of the African American student with a learning disability?**

### **Category II: Success**

**Academic Interaction.** Participants’ experiences which contribute to their success as a college student is within the context that the world is not separate from their

learning environment. Every participant expressed the need to see the connections between academic content and the real world. For instance, while conversing about how college has changed them with respect to transitioning from high school to college, Rev discussed that ~~the~~ “the stuff that I am learning helps me apply what I learned and to life situations” (R, m, p.6, line 123- 124). Rev also talks about a professor that has created an environment that’s beneficial for him. He explained, ~~he~~ “[math professor] made math easier; I was doing the class evaluations and I talked about how he found ways to fix problems and related them to life situations and every kind of math situation; everything he did had an illustration, he had something related to it which made it a whole lot easier” (R, m, p.8, line 164- 168).

Fontain talked about a similar experience when I asked him to describe a professor that has created the most beneficial learning environment for him. He told me about his sociology professor and how he had a different way of teaching by not using ~~millions~~ “millions and millions of pages of book work and paperwork” (F, m, p.6, line 116). He explained, ~~he~~ “he gets us involved and he used really cool scenarios too, he wouldn’t use the basic, he actually compared it to the world and things in the world that really happen” (F, m, p.6, line 122-124). Fontain goes on to say that the professor would ask students comical questions and engaged students in the lecture. Fontain concluded by telling me he didn’t want to go this class because it started at eight in the morning, but by the end of the period, ~~he~~ “he had the whole classroom just laughing that early” (F, m, p.6, line 128).

Robert and I discussed his psychology course during one of the interviews. This is one of the best college classes, he explains, ~~because~~ “because I like to know about people, what

goes on in there head” (RS, m, p. 5, line 112). Robert recalls one of the lectures where the professor was discussing different sleep cycles and how people sleep. The professor showed a video with various images of sleep positions. Robert started laughing out in class when an image of a familiar picture appeared. He said, “sleep like that, I thought it was pretty cool how you could relate to it” (R, m, p. 6, line 117- 118).

**Front Row.** During my field observations, I noticed that every participant selected a seat at the front row of the classroom. This perception of front row seating is linked with recurring comments from participants, during member checking, about not wanting to be perceived as “unintelligent, stupid, and unfocused.” It was clear that each student purposely selected a front row seat based on my field work notes. For example, while observing Rev, according to my field notes, after nine minutes of the start of class, the following is what I recorded:

–2:09- Rev enters the classroom from the rear. Many seats are empty in the back of the classroom; the instructor continues to lecture as Rev appears to be searching for a seat; he walks down the leveled classroom to a seat in the first row of the classroom; he pulls out a binder and pencil; scratches his head and appears to be writing down information from the chalk board.”

When I asked each student about why they sat in the front of the class, each made comments related to being a dedicated and conscientious student. Each desired to be involved in their learning experiences, which translates into taking more notes, participating in more class discussions and maintaining better study habits. The hope,

they explained, is they are often more in tune with the instructor, which represents the intentions to be visible to the instructor.

There was a sense from each participant that sitting in the front row encouraged them to become more focused on the lecture and class discussion. By sitting at the front of the class, each of them felt as if they are a contributing part of the learning environment. Rev expressed that his mother strongly encouraged him to sit in front of the class. Specifically, he said his mother told him that because you have a disability, you must sit in front of the classroom. Rev wrote about this in one of his journals explaining:

When I sit up front, there is nothing and no one to distract me from paying attention to what the teacher is saying... by sitting at the front of the class, I have a chance and I am able to help myself concentrate more and focus on getting my work done.

Robert talked to me about his reasons for sitting in front of the class. He discussed that there are a few distractions in the front of the class. He said that he feels —~~is~~ tempted to distract himself if he sits at the front of the room.”

Fontain reported that he sits in front of the class because —~~it~~’s easier to catch the attention of the professor and ask questions.” Throughout my observations in Fontain’s classroom, I noticed that he sits next to the instructor. Periodically, according to my field notes, the instructor and Fontain would share a whisper back and forth. On one occasion, the instructor asked Fontain if he has his music worksheet for today’s class. While observing this interaction, there was a correlation between physical closeness and academic involvement with Fontain and the instructor. Later, Fontain explained, —~~I~~do well when I sit closer to the instructor.”

**RO 3: How does the university African American student compensate and use identity for his or her learning disability to achieve academic goals?**

**Category III: Compensation**

**Individualized Expression.** Throughout the time I spent with the participants, it was revealed that the presence of individualized expressions prompted each participant to display their creative and distinct individuality. It is reasonable to assume that their individualized identity statuses related to various types of social beliefs. All three participants expressed that their individual self-expression as an integral component of self-awareness and progression on a personal developmental journey, as a student with LD. During many of our member checks, participants talked about knowing themselves enough to realize their strengths and weaknesses, which created a more authentic relationship between the participants and I. My conversations with each participant revealed that there was a sense of certain conditions through feelings to merge with the popular culture as a whole. It was clear that these young men focus is on their individuality, not the LD.

Throughout this research I noticed that each participant had a way of focusing on their individual uniqueness within their behavior; all of them changed their hair style. For example, at the beginning of the study, Rev had a low haircut. By the end of the study, he cut his hair designed like a mohawk. I asked Rev about his new haircut and he explained, “I think people feel like I have to cut my hair a certain way to get to a certain place in life. My haircut is an expression of me.”

Robert discussed this as we talked about one of his favorite professors. “When I got my corn-rolls [a style of wearing hair in very tight braids] the professor was like wow you have corn-rolls, good that’s nice; the fact that he sees me and remembers me makes me feel good” (RS, p. 5, line 100- 103). Robert and I continued our conversation about his hairstyle and reasons for this type of style. He told me that it’s how he was feeling at that time in his life. “Being an African-American with African American hair, I can try a new style and look, and if we don't like it, I can grow it out and try something new.”

There was a slightly different perception on individualized expression with Fontain. For one of his research journals (see **Appendix G**), he displayed pictures and charts related to how he perceives himself and how he is perceived by others. The data began with the date he was born until 2010. His charts displayed high rankings with the largest percentage in the ‘just pure amazingness’ category. When I asked Fontain to explain more of this journal entry, he replied, “It’s my personal expression, which is an essential component of my well-rounded education and personality; I like this because it provides a stage for me to discover who I am and connect with others.” I asked him why he displayed it this way and he responded, “I wanted to express myself artistically.”

**Creating New Identities.** The perceptions toward the development and compensation of identity raised an interesting finding with participants. This finding revealed the complex nature of their experiences in redeveloping their identity (academically and personally) while maintaining their other shifting identities. All three participants discussed ways they become involved in a wide array of college experiences. The underlying theme here is that through interactions with the university or academic

environment, participants are transforming themselves and changing their identity. Each participant discussed how their identity is largely independent from their disability and ethnic identity.

When I asked Robert about what he thinks it takes to be successful in college, he noted, “I guess you have to believe in yourself and understand who you were and who you are today” (RS, m, p.5, line 99-101). I asked him to explain more of that and he replied, “I am becoming to understand myself and my place at this university.” Robert continues by stating how much support he receives from his Greek fraternity brothers and his interaction with the various communities at the university. As Robert and I discussed his identity, there was a sense that social practices he is engaged in helps to shift and influence his identity.

Fontain’s response to my question about a goal he has set in the pass. He points out, “I really want to find out who I am again because I felt like I lost a big chunk of that as I reflected on the last eight years” (F, m. p.6, line 118- 120). Fontain continued our discussion by informing me he was conducting some “deep self-reflection” about his actions and the intentions associated with them. He advised me that he anticipated changing his attitude and behavior. Moreover, Fontain revealed that he uses self-reflection to improve his practices. Self-reflection seemed to aid in his ability to make sense of the abstract idea of the academic environment.

Rev also spoke about his academic identity when I asked him about how he would improve his experience in college. He spoke of evaluating himself by stating, “I would change me being more focus from the start; trying to put forth everything, realizing that

my grades were going to be with me” (R, m, p.4, line 97- 104). In Rev’s case, he viewed himself through his actions. He examines what has worked and what hasn't in the classroom, despite the many negative circumstances he has encountered. It seems that Rev, as a freshman student, is learning to adopt the unique patterns of the university to gain full participation and entrance inside the community. During one of our member checks, Rev explained that one of his professors sent him an e-mail requesting that he participate in class discussion. Rev noted that the professor explained that he was doing well on written assignments, but the professor would like to connect with him during the class. Before we concluded our conversation, Rev asked me, “Am I expected by my professor to communicate in specific ways?” Throughout our talk, there was a sentiment of acceptance into the college community from Rev. On the other day, there was a sense that he was unfamiliar to entering this environment and he did not have specific instructions in the language of the academy.

### **Additional Comments from Participants**

Students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to build a relationship directly with me. Rev stated, “I appreciate the time you took to schedule to sit and talk with me. Thank you for all your guidance” When asked how this study improved your academic experiences, he explained, “finding more time to meet with my professors and knowing that I have support.” The other students commented that additional opportunities to talk about how they are succeeding in college were helpful.

In general, student participants were eager to meet more often with me, either to experience more learning opportunities about themselves and/ or to obtain more advice.

Fontain said, “I am really enjoying spending time in your office; just to talk and learn more outside the classroom.” Robert commented “I learned a lot through coming here; I think you are a good role model.” Robert continued by stating, “You help to clarify a lot of the things I learned in class and gave me excellent advice.”

### **Summary**

This present study supports the need for post-secondary institutions to be aware of African American culture: learning the impact of culture and learning styles.

Understanding another person’s experiences does not require aligning those experiences in a hierarchical fashion. Understanding requires only that people recognize their knowledge and standpoint as partial. In this way, no individual possesses complete knowledge. Rather, knowledge and understanding are linked and dependent upon individuals collectively (Collins, 2000).

I believe that the most essential need for African American students labeled with LD, such as the three participants in this study, is the need to engage actively in dialogue with education providers. The opportunity to share the experience and find a voice to turn outward and claim a place as equal citizens is essential. Hilliard (1976) suggests that if schools expect to increase the academic achievement of African-American students, they must become much more flexible in school culture. The culture of the schools must learn how to accommodate the diverse learning styles. The journey of self- representation will be more complex for the student whose intellect has gone unrecognized and whose identity evokes suspicion and stigma.

Data from the individual participants revealed the perceptions of their experiences

as an African American college student with LD. By using the participant's own words through quotes, journals, and member checking, I hope to have provided an illustration of the experiences of these three African American male students with LD at this particular institution and at this specific time in their lives.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion, Implication for Practice, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

#### **Discussion**

In this final chapter, an evaluation of this study is carried out, including the contributions from the study. The discussion concludes with implication for practice as well as scope for possible further future work.

Conclusions derived from the logical analysis presented in the Results and Discussions Chapter shall be presented and clearly enumerated, each point stated separately. This study examined the experiences and perceptions of three African American male students with LD on a college campus. The findings in this study suggest the students' experiences, as an African American with LD, indicated very little impact on their post-education study. However, some particular experiences contributed to several academic and social developmental outcomes. Results of this study provide program planning decisions as well as service initiation decisions for African American students with disabilities.

The most confirming finding in this study was the need for academic interaction (from RQ 2). The theme here, as Boykin (1983) cites and refers to as harmony, is the need to connect between academic content and the real world. The participant's impact of this dimension shows how they describe and negotiate their LD in the post-secondary setting. *Harmony* refers to a concept in a holistic manner rather than discretely (Boykin, 1983). I'm using the definition of harmony as nurturing of the whole student, rather than

one specific aspect of development. In this case, the manifestation of harmony in the participant's experiences, as college students with LD, is in context with the world and not separated. Each participant attributes this to a need for the curriculum to have human and social relevance.

Although there is limited research on the experiences of academic engagement with African American males (Swail et al., 2003), the specific theme of academic interaction is fairly consistent with much of the lack of engagement experiences with each participant. The sense of belonging in the classroom community is considered a necessary antecedent to a successful academic learning experience (Kagan, 1990). Participants acquire educational information and use resources from the school's social structure, peer interactions, and the relationships they develop with teachers. These relationships affect their educational expectations and post-secondary participation by providing them with information and learning experiences, and by helping them take advantage of educational opportunities. Once again, each participant is aware of his learning needs and the method instruction is delivered while seated in a university classroom.

The finding of front row seating (from RQ 2) represents the importance of being visible to the instructor. It is clear that seating arrangements affects the level of interaction between the teacher and student. In every occasion, each participant deliberately selected a front row seat and purposely passed many open seats in the back of the classroom. Research has indicated that teachers identify students who sit in the front row in classrooms as being \_\_more attentive, likable, initiating, and responsive than students who sit farther away\_\_ (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2002). In addition, front row

seating indicates one's interest, involvement, and desire for inclusion (Cooper & Simonds, 2003). Literature related to the experience in the classroom suggests that students who sit in the front row are more likely to get A's (Benedict and Hoag 2004; Pedersen 1994). However, the available literature is unclear on whether it is the seating location or some other factor that is related to student success in the classroom.

Rebeta et al. (1993) suggest that students create a self-fulfilling prophesy with choices they make in seats. For example, the prophesy is developed based upon how the students feel they are going to do when they select a seat in the front row of the classroom. The authors continue their argument and state that students select seats where teachers are likely to call on them or where they might get less personal attention. Becker et al. (1973) discovered that there was a link between the type of student and where they selected to sit in a classroom. They noted a substantial difference in participation based on the number of students involved in the class. The motivation for achievement was measured by Burda (1996). Findings in this study suggest that motivated students tended to sit in the front row of the classroom.

The field of motivation, specifically the theory of self-determination, which I will discuss later, focuses on the affects regarding to behavior and action (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Examining these relationships helps to explain the classroom engagement and motivation these African American young men with LD have and the reason they sit in the front row. The works of Osborne (1997) and Cokley (2002) are essential in the discussion of reasons why these participants make a conscious decision to sit in the front row. The participants, who are members of a stigmatized group, use this method of

engaging academic as a mechanism to safeguard their academic self-concept, self-esteem, and intrinsic motivation.

Turning to RQ 1, self-determination was one of the findings that added to their experiences and perceptions as an African American with LD. All participants spoke of incidents that happened in their lives. They discussed being goal oriented and applying problem-solving and decision-making skills to guide their actions. *Self-determination* is defined as an individual's awareness of strengths and weaknesses, the ability to set goals and make choices, to be confident at appropriate times and to collaborate with others in a socially competent manner (Serna and Lau-Smith, 1995). According to Serna and Lau-Smith (1995), "a self-determined person is able to make independent decisions based on his or her ability to use resources, which includes collaborating and networking with others" (pg. 142). Serna contends that a self-determined person is has the ability to realize his or her own potential, become a productive member of a community, and obtain his or her goals without infringing on the rights, responsibilities, and goals of others.

With self-determination, this concept helps Rev, Fontain, and Robert choose their behavior and reactions instead of fear of ruling by them. Applying self-determination to each participant's experience in post-secondary education involves valuing education and having confidence in their strengths. Self-determination skills are comparable to the resiliency factors of social competence, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and the future (Serna, Forness, & Nielsen, 1998). According to Serna et al., these three factors are consistent across cultures, which have been taught with much success to students from

diverse cultures to avoid diagnosis leading to special education services. Using self-determination provided participants with the encouragement to set goals and manage problems.

Under RQ 1, each participant identified with being placed in the corner or separated from their peers during instructional time in the classroom. Each explained that special education and the barrier of the special education label kept them from friends and academic experiences. This barrier contributed to confluence of their disability status, which affected their peer relationships. The issue of separation among students with disabilities is a function of dissonance between values; that is, educators need to develop goals designed to keep diagnosed students from moving to more restrictive environments and start placing students into less constricting settings. Based upon the research, these participants could've been more academically responsive in the learning process if their educators implemented cooperative learning.

Hale-Benson (1982) indicated that teachers of African American students must recognize the role culture has on learning styles and adapt teaching styles to correspond with these learning styles while addressing the least restrictive environment. Moreover, Hale-Benson (1982) suggests that African American children engage in people-oriented learning styles. Specifically, working collaboratively in groups with others is a strategy useful for some African American students. For instance, Baker (1999) found that teachers who engaged African American students in small group instruction and cooperative learning displayed an improvement in academic performance and school satisfaction.

Since the 1970's, cooperative learning instruction has been evaluated and implemented in classroom environments around the nation. Cooperative learning has encouraged student relations and academic motivation toward instruction (Fordham, 1996). In addition, Gillies and Ashman (2002) indicate that cooperative learning produce positive effects on academic achievement with African American students. As our society increases in diversity, teachers have a responsibility to increase in their understanding of the integral relationship between culture and academic engagement. Educators must understand how culture, disability, and ethnic identities relate to life circumstances of the students they are instructing.

The sense of recreating identity is a key theme under RQ 3. Participants discussed understanding and recreating a new identity between their individuality and the academic environment. They expressed the importance of negotiation and how identity is shaped by the school community as it is linked to many of their "real life" identities. Results from Berzonsky and Kuk (2000) study concluded that students with a sense of recreating identity were more likely to seek out, evaluate, and use self-reflection information. In addition, these researchers discovered that identity and self-reflection, decision-making, and openness are highly correlated (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000).

Moreover, recreating their identity is an ethical issue, as participants attempt to understand their disability, academic and social environment. By not recreating their identity within the transition of their new academic environment, they lose connection to the community. Without that connection to the community, communication important for

success can't take place, and participants have a difficult time being productive while in the turmoil of identity loss.

In the participants' cases, construction of recreating identity helps them to diffuse the social processes of practice and sense making of the university learning environment. There is research to suggest that African American students recreate identity to protect their sense of worth (Cokley, 2002; Osborne, 1997). This is when students' self-esteem and identity are no longer tied to their achievement. Understanding the sociocultural factors that influence identity may help to recreate new identities (Wertsch, 1991). In other words, the recreation of their identity might assist these young men in the transition of their new academic environments.

Finally, under RQ 3, these participants spoke about their individualized expression. Participants expressed their unique feeling and awareness to be an individual. The participant's individualism represents a set of values associated with independence and self-expression. Individualism, according to Triandis (1996), is the perception of personal goals, uniqueness, and autonomy from groups. Research suggests that African American adults report higher individualistic attitudes and behaviors (Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Triandis and Gelfand's (1998) findings claim that there are horizontal and vertical dimensions of individualism (i.e., uniqueness, freedom of expression) with African American adults. Some evidence reported by Triandis and Gelfand's (1998) determined that many African Americans validate vertical individualism (emphasizing hierarchy). For example, students identifying

with vertical individualism want to be distinguished from others and seek high status through competition (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998).

Boykin (1983, 1986), found that many African Americans express themselves in unique and distinctive, nonhierarchical ways. Simons (2003) argues that many African American adults promote their individual status to maintain an equal relationship with peers. Webb-Johnson (2003) agreed with these authors and also suggests that many African American students engage in individualized expressive behaviors (e.g., style of hair, arrangements of clothing, manner of greeting) while stabilizing an equivalent status with peers.

As I mentioned previously, each participant displayed a unique personality and a certain twist to their behavior. Boykin (1983) suggests that this display is an orientation to life as an "artistic endeavor, rather than a scientific endeavor." The focus for these participants is on the creative synthesis of their experiences. This unarticulated conditioning expression includes habitual forms of behavior ingrained in patterns of action.

In conclusion, the findings in this study suggest the students' experiences impact post-educational outcomes in positive ways. Some particular experiences may contribute to several academic and social developmental outcomes. Results of this study provide insights into the experiences and perceptions of three African American college students with LD transitioning to post-secondary academic environments. Results of this study provide program planning decisions as well as service initiation decisions for African American students with disabilities. The findings are a beginning step towards better

understanding of the impacts of LD and ethnicity as participants matriculate through the university community.

This study expands Michalko's (2002) theory by demonstrating that voice is necessary to deconstruct disability and to understand authentic research, which, in this case, positively influences educational outcomes for each student. In Michalko's words:

–It is small wonder that many of us who are disabled subscribe to the 'person first' ideology. We place the common ground of personhood before the not-so-common-one of disability. Choosing personhood over disability emphasizes both the strength of personhood and its separation from the body. As much as we want to repress any memory of the fate of our bodies, we also want to be reminded of just how strong personhood is in the face of this fate. Disability can be our reminder" (2002, p. 11).

Understanding another person's experiences does not require aligning those experiences in a hierarchical fashion. Specifically, understanding requires that people recognize their knowledge and standpoint as partial. In this way, no individual possesses complete knowledge. The knowledge and understanding are linked and dependent upon individuals collectively (Collins, 2000). K-12 schools and higher education institutions must study how diverse learners should be accommodated. The journey of self-representation will be more complex for the student whose voice has gone unrecognized and whose identity evokes additional exploration.

Overall, the findings of this study support Thomas's (2003) theory of disability, that it is a product of social interaction. His proposition suggests that a social model

perspective does not deny the importance or value of appropriate individually based interventions in the lives of people with disabilities. It draws attention to furthering their empowerment and inclusion in a society constructed by non-disabled people for non-disabled people.

Finally, the underlying finding in this study is that these African American college students with LD are more inclusive in their experiences. Thinking, feeling, and behaving are interdependent. Acknowledging and understanding these aspects of African-Americans with LD in the post-secondary setting would facilitate their learning potential. Although this study focuses on African American students with LD, the elements of school relationships presented can meet the needs of a broad range of post-secondary students across the nation as all students can develop educational values, information, and opportunities from school relationships. Post-secondary administrators, university faculty members, and policy makers can use the findings in this study and develop programs and policies that can enhance students' school relationships, increase their post-secondary participation, and better prepare them for the labor force.

### **Implication for Practice**

This qualitative study provided a thorough look at university African American men with LD. This gave them an opportunity to tell their own stories of exploring, learning, and coping with LD from the time when they were diagnosed in grade school to their enrollment in a post-secondary setting. The next section presents three implications for practice based on the data discussed in chapter 4. Implications for practice include taking note, shared roles, and self-advocacy.

### **Taking note**

As I pointed out in RQ 3, individualized expression, one of the benefits of success with these participants is building effective relationships with their instructor(s). Students who establish positive relationships with instructors can obtain more awareness on how to create a specific course plan for academic progress. This goes beyond receiving specific feedback and instruction.

University professors could capitalize on this quality by taking note of student's particular ways of expression, such as talking to others, writing, and questioning. This could allow students to foster a positive interaction that can open up the opportunity for dialogue if a difference of opinion arises. Those instructors that view certain behaviors as functions of a culture benefit from teaching multiculturally.

Instructors that reach out and attempt to make connections, such as complimenting students' uniqueness, watching for student sensitivities, and taking note of individual patterns of students' behavior, are demonstrating a respect individuality (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Instructors who make these connections have greater access to information regarding students' lives and are able to work more effectively with the students' academic achievements. More importantly, this aids in welcoming the general strengths and experiences of African American students to the academic realm.

### **Shared Roles**

As African American students with LD prepare to enter the post-secondary setting, they must consider how to build support networks that meet their learning, identity, and social needs with and utilize resources available to them both on the college

campus and within the surrounding community. Opportunities to meet and network with professionals who have navigated the college learning community can help students like Rev, Fontain, and Robert tap resources that will support their academic endeavors.

At the same time, before university personnel can work successfully with African American students with LD, they must understand how ethnicity (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999) and disability identities relate to their own lives. Institutions of higher learning, including student affairs and diversity offices, would benefit from conducting student perceptual and experimental research similar to the type reported in this study. Such information could provide even more institutionally relevant and context-specific information to inform decision-making as well as resource allocation decisions for African American students with disabilities. Ideas about disability and being African American in college show that coping strategies and supportive educational outcomes for students with disabilities are essential in an institution of higher education.

### **Social Inclusion**

It was clear that each participant liked being with their friends and having an active social life (from RQ 1). Many students that develop and maintain social networks in grade school are likely to do so in the post-secondary setting (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). However, as all three participants expressed, they had trouble in grade school making and keeping friends due to such factors as being separated from their peers during instructional time. Some benefits of social inclusion include helping students with disabilities feel like they are a part of the general public, giving them a positive feeling of

self-worth and supporting their development of positive relationships with others, which in turn increases their independence.

African American students with disabilities may be at even greater risk of social isolation due to their membership in two minority groups (Hollins et al., 2002). African American students may face discrimination because some of the behaviors accepted in the home and community are not considered acceptable at school (Cartledge & Loe, 2001). As in the case with Fontain, who explained developing an oppositional social identity which alienated him from the classroom community.

By using an individualized approach, professionals responsible for transition should work with each student, his or her family, and teachers to identify strengths and resources that can help the students achieve better social inclusion (Black & Ornellas, 2001). Teaching social skills to student is often suggested (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Quinn, et al., 1999). Specifically, individualized social skills training should be conducted in order for it to be effective and to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The individualization in activity could provide each individual participant and trainer with opportunities to emphasize mutual respect and acceptance of diversity (Todd et al., 1999).

As I listened to each participant, I realized that they are telling a story about what they need as a member of a global society. As parents, educators, and other key professionals, we can't dismiss the needs that we do not relate to or completely comprehend. It is essential to insure that we hear what they are saying. We must do what we can to empower students like Robert, Fontain, and Rev and listen to what they are

saying. This and much more should be examined regarding how to best meet the needs of not only African American male students with LD, but all students with disabilities on university campus.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation in this study is that the study addressed African American male students with LD. The perceptions of women at the college level receiving accommodations as a student with LD are not represented. Thus, implications that can be drawn are specific only to the experiences and perceptions of this sample group. Although the sample size and selection in qualitative research are not focused on size or breadth, an analysis of the experiences of African American male college students with LD could yield significantly different results.

A further limitation of this study is collecting data in the college classroom. As college classrooms become more diverse, instructors are increasingly challenged to address a variety of learning styles (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic) in ways that engage every student within a single class period. One restriction is that, while entering the college classroom, the instructor may believe that the research investigates how their teaching and learning occur in their course. The higher education instructor may demonstrate a paradigm shift to enhance an accessible classroom and supportive atmosphere, particularly for the participant in the study. The study is not a substitute for interaction between instructor and student, but captures the experiences by the student in the classroom.

My position and status as an African American male may have created another limitation. This status limits the study, risking bias toward the data collection and analysis. I acknowledge bias in analyzing these findings. Conducting research across racial lines involves constant reflection on my own perceived dominant and marginalized status. I brought to this study my own assumptions of what it means to be an African American, male, a former special education educator, and a LD specialist. Those assumptions are inextricably linked to my own race, gender, and identity, and thus affected how I heard or interpreted the voices of these participants. Although my aim was to report what they said using their words to illustrate their experiences, I found it difficult at times to balance my understanding of transparency in qualitative research that included who I am and honoring the stories told by each participant.

On the other hand, this insider status gave me an unusual opportunity for candid conversations. This study involved giving up a considerable amount of autonomy in defining the research agenda in order to address the success of Robert, Fontain, and Rev. For example, I immersed myself in ongoing data analysis that involved reflection, writing, and follow-up conversations with the three participants. I shared my thoughts with each participant to expand and broaden my analysis of specific events, emotions, and thoughts.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Research is needed to further validate the information provided by the students' experiences. The findings described are based on the experiences of three African American college students with LD located at a metropolitan university in the southwest

region of the United States. Ideally, this research should be replicated with a larger number of African American students with LD from various geographical areas and enrolled in varying types of colleges (e.g., community college, technical colleges).

With two of the three participants involved in social organizations on the college campus, future research could delve deeper to explore the differences in African American students with LD educational gains and how these gains attribute to student involvement.

Further research is necessary to determine the relationship between identity and disability with African American college students with LD, as these appear to be a stimulating and important issue for each participant.

Finally, there is very little research on gender and ethnicity with college students with LD. For example, future research should provide the opportunity to give voice to African American women with LD, given their triple jeopardy status as a minority with a disability and adding the element of gender. Similar to this population of students, definitive research is necessary to explore the experiences of Native American and Hispanic students with LD in the post-secondary setting. Specifically, inquiries should define the views of indigenous culture toward disability, identity, and how the university setting might shape perceptions within the academic community.

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Table 1:1  
*Summary of Research*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Percentage of Ethnic Group</b>
Barga, 1996	9 students enrolled in a 4 year university	Medium sized, 4 year state university	Positive and negative coping techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Review of academic files</li> </ul> Collection of files related to participants	None	Qualitative research strategies	All participants were Caucasian
Butler, 1998	34 students with learning disabilities	Students' home campus in offices used by campus support personnel	Improvements in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Task performance</li> <li>- Metacognition</li> <li>- Self- efficacy</li> <li>- Active strategy development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Percentages</li> <li>- Scores</li> <li>- Interviews</li> </ul>	- Strategic Content Learning Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pre/ Post</li> <li>- Parallel design across projects</li> </ul>	Not reported
Cowen, 1998	25 students with Learning disabilities attending a state university	Unknown	Developed coping strategies	Percentage of agreement of cluster scores	Self- report open ended questionnaire	Descriptive Data	Not reported

Table 1:2  
*Summary of Research*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Percentage of Ethnic Group</b>
Denhart, 2008	11 College students with LD	University site	Barriers within higher education	Transcribed interviews	None	Descriptive data	Not reported
Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, and Acosta, 2005	Inconclusive	University site	Focus groups to explore student identified barriers to the access and utilization of educational supports and subsequent employment	Transcription and notes of summary	None	Descriptive data	Study used African American students but did not indicate the number.
Getzel and Thoma, 2008	34 students with Learning Disabilities	University site	Focus groups regarding self-determination in higher education settings	Summary of scribe notes - Coded for emergent themes	None	Descriptive data	African American students comprised of 12 out of 34 with Learning Disabilities

Table 1:3  
*Summary of Research*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Percentage of Ethnic Group</b>
Hartman-Hall and Haaga, 2002	86 University students with LD	Unknown	Willingness to seek help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Means</li> <li>• Standard deviations</li> <li>• F- scores</li> <li>• Scale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self- reports</li> <li>• Experimental manipulation situations</li> </ul>	Comparison	4.7% (n= 18) African American
Heiman, 2006	32 undergraduate students with LD 180 undergraduate students without LD	University campus	Processing Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Univariate analysis</li> <li>• Multivariate analysis</li> </ul>	Self- report questionnaire	Correlations between subscales	Not reported
Heiman and Kariv, 2004	130 university students with learning disabilities and 146 students without learning disabilities	Mailed responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social support</li> <li>• Stress</li> <li>• Sense of coherence</li> <li>• Academic success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Means</li> <li>• Standard deviation</li> <li>• F- scores</li> </ul>	Self- Report instruments	Comparison	Not reported

Table 1:4  
*Summary of Research*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Percentage of Ethnic Group</b>
Heiman & Prechel, 2003	191 college students with learning disabilities and 190 students without learning disabilities	Mailed responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic studies</li> <li>• Learning strategies</li> <li>• Coping during exams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency</li> <li>• Descriptive statistics</li> <li>• Chi- square analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning strategies questionnaire</li> <li>• Factors in academic success</li> </ul>	Comparison	Not reported
Kirby et al., 2008	36 Students with LD and 66 post-secondary students without LD	Unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading speed</li> <li>• Reading comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate</li> <li>• # of words read correctly</li> <li>• Scores</li> <li>• Scales</li> </ul>	Self- report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison</li> <li>• Correlations</li> </ul>	Not reported
Madaus, Scott, and McGuire, 2003	Not reported		Focus groups to determine the students' perceptions of barriers in higher education	Themes found throughout the focus group	Not reported		Not reported

Table 1:5  
*Summary of Research*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Percentage of Ethnic Group</b>
Reaser et al., 2007	100 undergraduate students with LD and 50 undergraduate students without LD	University campus (clinic)	Learning and Study Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scale</li> <li>• Percentile score</li> </ul>	LASSI (2 <sup>nd</sup> edition)	Comparison	33% (n= 50) African American students
Ruban et al., 2003	53 students with learning disabilities and 417 students without learning disabilities	Mailed responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard self-regulated learning strategies</li> <li>• Compensation strategies</li> </ul>	Percent of variance	Cross- sectional survey	Comparison	4.3% (n= 18) African American without LD 2.3% (n= 12) African Americans with LD
Shafir & Siegel, 1994	47 -20 Reading disability - 15 Learning disability - 12 Nondisabled readers	Unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual scanning strategies</li> <li>• Phonological rehearsal</li> </ul>	# of correct responses	Computer based matching task	Comparison	Not reported

Table 1:6  
*Summary of Research*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Percentage of Ethnic Group</b>
Stage and Milne, 1996	8 undergraduate students with LD	University setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitudes</li> <li>• Perceptions</li> <li>• Experience</li> </ul>	Transcribed data from interview	None	Ethnographic Techniques	Not reported
Trainin & Swanson, 2005	40 students - 20 with learning disabilities - 20 without learning disabilities from four universities	Unknown	Phonological processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean</li> <li>• Standard Deviation</li> </ul>	Achievement, process, and metacognitive measures	Comparison	12.5% (n= 2) African American students with learning disabilities
Vogel & Adelman, 1992	62 students with learning disabilities and 58 matched students (without a learning disability)	Unknown	Academic achievement abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean</li> <li>• Rate</li> <li>• GPA</li> <li>• Standard Deviation</li> <li>• Range</li> </ul>	Screening Instruments	Comparison	Not reported

Table 1:7  
*Summary of Research*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Percentage of Ethnic Group</b>
Wilson and Lesaux, 2001	59 students with learning disabilities -28 with reading disabilities - 31 control	Unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phonological awareness</li> <li>• Phonological recordings in lexical access</li> <li>• Phonological recording in working memory</li> </ul>	Scores	Standardized and experimental measures	Comparison	Not reported
Worden and Nakamura, 1982	24 students with LD and 24 "normal" college students	Unknown	Story comprehension and recall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ratings</li> <li>• # of units recall</li> <li>• Mean</li> </ul>	Stimulus Stories	Comparison	Not reported

Table 2.0  
*Demographic Data of the Participants*

Participant	Age (Years)	Classification	Major/ Minor	Initial Diagnosis
Robert Slaton	21	Junior	Elementary Studies/ Drama	Grade 6.0
Fontain	20	Sophomore	Theater/ Undecided	Grade 4.0
Rev	18	Freshman	Undecided	Multidisciplinary report did not indicate exact elementary grade level

Table 3.0  
*Categories and Themes*

<b>I. Experiences and Perceptions</b>	<b>II. Success</b>	<b>III. Compensation</b>
A. In the corner	A. Academic Interaction	A. Individualized Expression
B. Self-determination	B. Front row seating	B. Creating New Identities

Figure 1:  
*Rate of African American Male Placement in Special Education*  
Source: US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2006

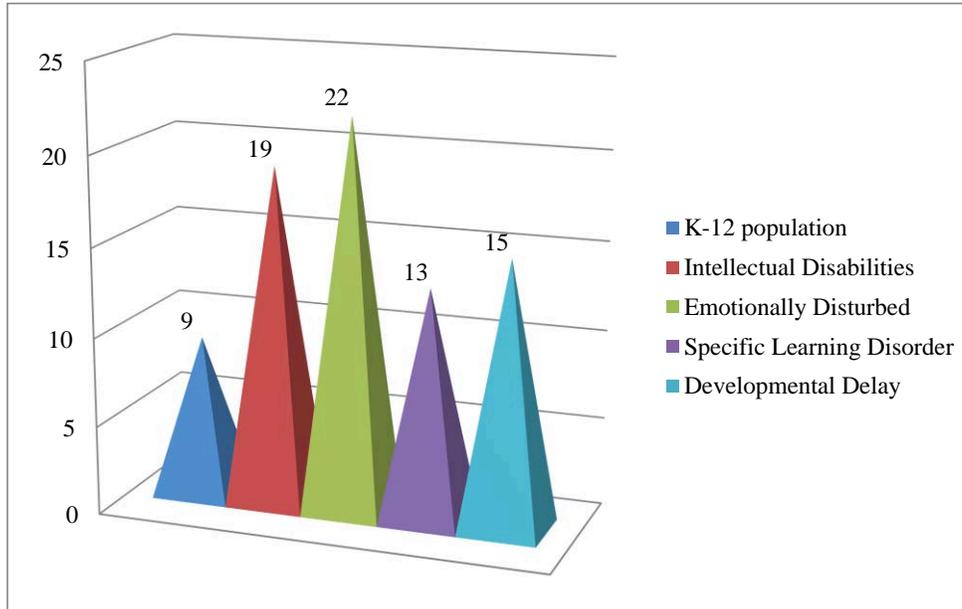


Figure 2:  
*Guiding Principles of Analysis*

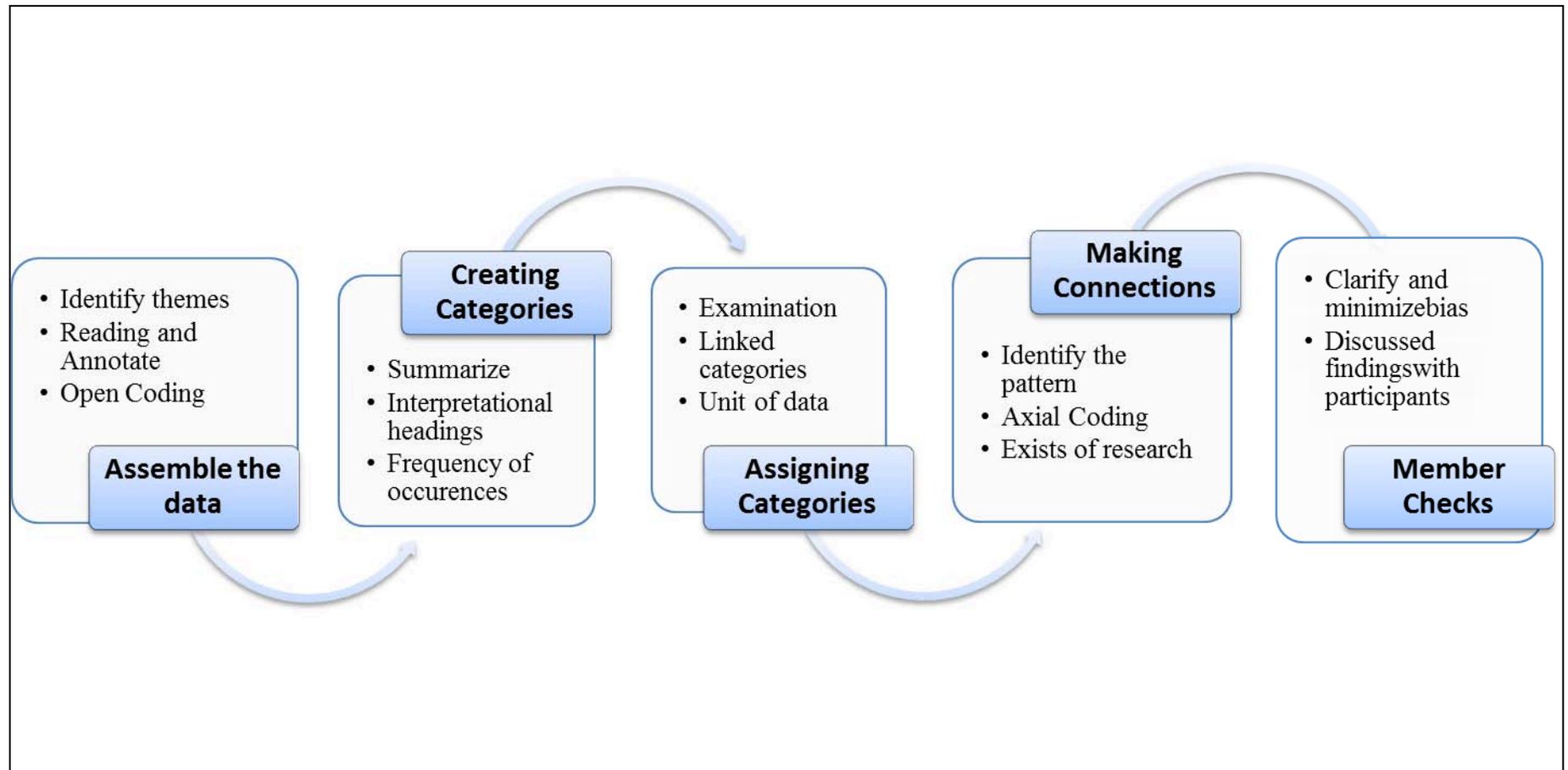


Figure 3:  
*Lecture Hall*



## Appendix

Appendix A  
*Student Notification*

Dear Student:

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study conducted by George Williams, Jr., Academic Student Success Manager in Accessibility Resource Center. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to become familiar with African American students with learning disabilities enrolled at a post- secondary school. This study will involve George, several College of Education Faculty members at the University of New Mexico, and the University of New Mexico IRB that oversees human subject research.

You will be asked to do the following:

1. Observed in a pre-selected college course in which you are enrolled.
2. Asked several questions in an interview of three different components.
3. Journal weekly about your learning experiences.
4. Review your psychological evaluation report and Individualized Education Program (IEP) related to information from your family history, specialized services, and college transcripts, to help evaluate your development and success.

By taking part in this study, you may improve and recognize strategies that help you become a successful college student. However, you may feel uncomfortable about discussing your experiences or answering questions about yourself, or otherwise feel self-conscious while participating in this study. All information is confidential and will not be shared with school personnel. There is a chance that someone who is not authorized to see information about you will accidentally see it. Any information you share will not have your name on it, but identified by a pseudonym (false name). Results will be presented in terms of pseudonyms, so no one can tell what individuals actually participated in the project. If you decide to participate in this study, please contact ARC and make an appointment to see George. Additional information regarding your consent to participate will be given to you during your meeting with George.

If you have questions or concerns, Dr. Loretta Serna, Professor in the College of Education, Department of Educational Specialties will be glad to answer them at (505) 277-0119. If you would like to speak with someone other than the research team, in regards to any complaints or questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you have about the study you may call the UNM IRB at (505) 277-1129.

Sincerely,

Director  
Accessibility Resource Center

Appendix B  
*Informed Consent Form*

The purpose of this study is to discover how you develop knowledge about the nature of your learning disabilities as well as your personal and academic strengths and weaknesses, which I believe, are vital for success in college. The central research question is: What are the experiences and perspectives of African- American students with a learning disability in the post- secondary school setting? In other words, what factors (i.e., family, economic resources) have contributed to the African American student with learning disabilities in his or her achievements as a university student and how does the African American student compensate for his or her learning disability to achieve academic goals in the university setting?

1. I would like to observe a pre-selected college course in which you are enrolled. This information includes observing your learning during the lecture period. With the consent of the college instructor, I will take notes in an inconspicuous area of the classroom. If the instructor(s) declines my invitation to complete observations, I will observe you during a study group session among your peers on campus. Do you consent?

YES

NO

2. I would like to ask you several questions in an interview of three different components. The first component of the interview will ask you questions related to your experience as an African- American student with a learning disability during your time in the K- 12 education years such as, **“What was it like being a student in Special Education?”** The second set of interview questions are related to your post- secondary experiences as an African American student with a learning disability. For example, **“How would you describe yourself in terms of your ability to study as an African American college student?”** is one of the questions I will ask you to respond to. The third set of the interview questions will ask you to discuss those practices that have helped you become a successful college student. For instance, **“What motivates you?”** is an example of these types of questions asked during this interview component. Do you consent?

YES

NO

3. **OPTIONAL:** If you choose this option, I would ask you to journal weekly about your learning experiences. Displaying what you learned this week is the key. You may use various methods to journal (i.e. recorder, paper and pencil, drawings, poems paintings, computer program). In addition, I will ask that you remove identifying information from your journal such as your first and last name before

Appendix B  
*Informed Consent Form (cont.)*

they submit it to me. I will use open coding to assist in analyzing your writing as well as all data in this study. Open coding is a mental openness that will allow me to explore the discovery of the unexpected along with a curiosity of what is happening. Do you consent and agree to this option?

YES

NO

4. In addition, I would like to review your psychological evaluation report and Individualized Education Program (IEP) related to information from your family history, specialized services, and college transcripts, to help evaluate your development and success. Do you consent?

YES

NO

**Consent**

You are making a decision whether to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you read the information provided. By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights as a research subject.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. By signing this consent form, I agree to participate (or let my child participate) in this study. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Adult Subject (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Adult Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE**

I have explained the research to the subject or his/her legal representative and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Investigator/ Research Team Member (type or print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Investigator/ Research Team Member)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix C  
*Demographic Questionnaire*

**Please complete the following identifying background information. Incomplete answers may invalidate the results of the study. DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THIS INFORMATION.**

**1. Age** \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Classification**

\_\_\_\_\_ Freshman    \_\_\_\_\_ Sophomore

\_\_\_\_\_ Junior    \_\_\_\_\_ Senior

**3. Gender**

\_\_\_\_\_ Male

\_\_\_\_\_ Female

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Specify \_\_\_\_\_)

**4. Major** \_\_\_\_\_

**Minor** \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Racial/ethnic background**

\_\_\_\_\_ African American/Black

\_\_\_\_\_ European/white

\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic/Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian

\_\_\_\_\_ Native American

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Specify \_\_\_\_\_)

**6. Most important influence on your decision to attend a post- secondary institution.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Parents    \_\_\_\_\_ Teachers    \_\_\_\_\_ Peers    \_\_\_\_\_ Profession    \_\_\_\_\_ Priest, minister

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Specify \_\_\_\_\_)

**7. Did you go to a special school or receive special education because of an intellectual disability in grade school?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_\_\_ No    \_\_\_\_\_ Don't know

**8. Do you have any OTHER condition or health problem?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_\_\_ No

If yes, describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix D  
*Researcher Flyer*

**Research Study on the Experiences of African American college students with Learning Disabilities**



**Your Participation will include:**

- *Classroom Observations* of your learning
- *Interview Questions* related to your experience as an African- American student with a learning disability
- *Weekly Journals* about your learning experiences its)

By taking part in this study, you may improve and recognize strategies that help you become a successful college student. With the development of your learning, it can help with the communication with your college instructors and could add to your school success skills. Information produced by this study may contribute to a greater understanding of the knowledge and strategies of students with disabilities, specifically African American students, to assist them in continuing their education pursuit in a post-secondary education setting.

Study located at the University of New Mexico, Accessibility Resource Center. For more information, contact George Williams, Jr. [geowillj@unm.edu](mailto:geowillj@unm.edu) or 463- 0645.

Appendix E  
*Participant Interview Questions*

**FORM ONE**

1. How would you describe your experience in school?
  - Grade school?
  - Middle school?
  - High school?
2. What was it like being a student in Special Education?
3. What was the most difficult adjustment you have ever had to make while in special education?
4. Give me an example of something you had to learn that was difficult while being a student in special education classes.
5. How has your grade school experience prepared you for college?
6. If you could change or improve anything about your grade school experience, what would it be?
7. Tell me about a person that influenced you while in grade school.
8. Do you like your teachers? Describe your favorite teacher. Explain.
9. Describe the best teachers you had throughout school. Explain.
10. Describe the worst teacher you had throughout school. Explain.
11. In grade school, did you have any hobbies or special interests? If so, describe them.

**FORM TWO**

1. Being an African American college student with a learning disability, what has been your most rewarding accomplishment?
2. How would you describe yourself in terms of your ability to study as an African American college student?
3. What are your strengths (e.g. academic, artistic, personal)?
4. Which academic areas are difficult for you and why?
5. Tell me about a major problem you recently handled while in college. Were you successful in resolving it?
6. Describe the type of professor that has created the most beneficial learning experience for you.
7. Which college classes or subjects have you liked best? Why?
8. What have you learned about your experiences outside the classroom as an African American college student with a learning disability?
9. How was your transition from high school to college? Did you face any particular problems

Appendix E (cont.)  
*Participant Interview Questions*

**FORM THREE**

1. How would you go about organizing yourself to accomplish goals?
2. To what extent, do you think that your grades are an indication of your academic achievement?
3. What steps do you follow to study a problem before making a decision?
4. What is your definition of success?
5. What motivates you?
6. What do you think it takes to be successful in college?
7. What do you expect to be doing in five years?
8. If you could do so, how would you plan your college career differently?
9. What is one thing about yourself that you would most like to change?
10. How has college changed you as a person?
11. What is one important goal that you set in the past? How did you go about reaching it?

Appendix F  
*Professor e-mail notification*

I'm currently working with \_\_\_\_\_ (Student Name) with a study I am conducting to explore the experiences and perceptions of African American students with Learning Disabilities in the post- secondary setting. In a recent meeting, \_\_\_\_\_ (Student Name), consented to participate in the research study as part of my completion of a doctoral dissertation here at the \_\_\_\_\_. The student graciously agreed to participate. The title of the study is: *Voices of the invisible: Exploring the experiences and perceptions of African American students with Learning Disabilities in the postsecondary education setting*. The proposed study includes interviews with the student participant and observations in their college course. To my understanding \_\_\_\_\_ (Student Name) is enrolled in your \_\_\_\_\_ (Name of Course) course this semester.

I'm writing to seek your permission to observe \_\_\_\_\_ (Student Name) in your course during your lecture period. As an observer, I will locate an inconspicuous location in the classroom and remain there until the end of the course period. The goal is to observe \_\_\_\_\_ (Student Name) during the duration of the semester in order to obtain data on how the student interacts in your course. I would like to begin the observations starting \_\_\_\_\_ (Start Date). You will not be asked to alter your daily routine and/ or interaction with the student.

I would be more than happy to discuss my research study further with you in person. Should you have questions related to my study, you may contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Loretta Serna, Professor in the College of Education/ Educational Specialties Department. Dr. Serna can be reached at 505/ 277- 0119 or [rett@unm.edu](mailto:rett@unm.edu).

Thank you for your time,

George Williams, Jr.  
Doctoral Candidate

Pretty much the biggest deal on campus  
October 30, 1990 - present

