Overrepresented and Undervalued: A Holistic Approach to Using Appreciative Advising to Support Black Boys in Special Education

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Abstract

The experiences of Black boys in educational settings are often shaped by a complex interplay of academic and societal realities. These realities, while not always seen as positive, have an impact on how these students are able to navigate through education. As such, the purpose of this article is to unpack many of the realities facing Black boys in special education and how Appreciative Advising can be seen as a method to better equip educators with tools to support students in achieving their educational goals.

Keywords

Black boys, Appreciative Advising, special education, K-12 education

The disproportionality of Black boys in special education persists in public schools nationwide. Although specific and definitive causes are unclear, research suggests several contributing factors, including inequalities embedded in the history of the American education system leading to deficit perspectives (Annamma et al., 2013), educator bias, including stereotypes, biases and microaggressions (Anderson-Clark et al., 2008; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2015; Kumar et al., 2022), student-teacher cultural mismatch (Fish, 2019; Weathers, 2019; Hart & Lindsay, 2024), and discrepancies in referral and disciplinary practices (Green et al., 2019). Although these issues remain at the forefront of their experiences, educators are often seeking new methods of supporting Black boys' success in special education. As such, we seek to explore how Appreciative Advising techniques can be used to support Black boys in special education. This article aims to discuss how the framework can be applied in K-12 settings, such as spaces that support Black boys in special education. To achieve this, we will first provide an overview of the existing literature, followed by considerations on how the Appreciative Advising framework can be utilized by educators to better support the experiences of Black boys in special education.

Literature Review

To understand how to support Black boys in special education, it is imperative to understand the factors that influence their experiences. First, we discuss disproportionality of Black boys in special education, specifically overrepresentation, drawing on the historical context of Black students in public schools, an exploration of Black students in special education, and Black students' classroom and teacher experiences, including the influence of teacher biases.

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Disproportionate Representation of Black Students in Education Programs

In special education, the term disproportionality is typically used to refer to differences in treatment based on membership in a particular group, such as race, ethnicity, or gender. This broad term encompasses overrepresentation and underrepresentation of various populations (Sullivan & Proctor, 2016). For example, Black students are disproportionately represented in gifted and talented classes as well as special education (National Education Association of the United States & National Association of School Psychologists, 2007). Adversely, overrepresentation is used to describe situations where percentages within a specific group surpass its representation in the general population, whereas underrepresentation indicates instances where a group's inclusion falls below expected levels in comparison to its representation in the general population.

Since the first identification of overrepresentation (Dunn, 1968), decades of consistent data show that Black students, especially boys, are overrepresented in special education (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Green et al., 2020; Tefera & Fischman, 2021), but not in all categories (Annamma et al., 2013; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Hart & Lindsay, 2024). Since the 1970s, The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has tracked and reported information on the overrepresentation of Black boys in special education. In the United States, before a student is eligible for special education services, they must meet the specified qualification criteria, as outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA specifies 13 categories of disability in which school age students may qualify for special education services. These categories include emotional disturbance (ED), autism, speech language impairments (SLI), orthopedic impairment, other health impairments, specific learning disabilities (SLD), intellectual disabilities (ID), hearing impairment, visual impairment, developmental delay, multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injury and deaf-blindness (IDEA, 2004). An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is created, outlining specially designed instruction for students who require special education services (Curran et al., 2021). Some categories, like specific learning disabilities (SLD), emotional disturbance (ED) and intellectual disabilities (ID), are more subjective than others, relying on clinical judgements (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Parrish, 2002) versus more objective categories that would require a diagnosis from a medical professional (Parrish, 2002).

Overrepresentation in special education is the most pronounced in subjective categories and high-incidence disabilities (Annamma et al., 2013; Cruz et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2023a; Hart & Lindsay, 2024). High-incidence disabilities are assessment-based and occur most often like specific learning disabilities (SLD; Ferri & Connor, 2005), emotional disturbance (ED), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), developmental delay (Ford et al., 2023a), and intellectual disabilities (Hart & Lindsay, 2024). Black students represent 15-16% of the total school population (NCES, 2024a), yet they account for 25% of students with ED (Green et al., 2020). They are up to two times more likely to be identified with ED (Bal et al., 2019), three times more likely to be identified with an intellectual disability, and 1.5 times more likely to be identified with a learning disability than their White peers (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Hibel et al., 2010).

Although overrepresentation in high-incidence disabilities for Black students is evident, their representation in low-incidence disabilities falls closer to their representation in the total student population (Annamma et al., 2013; Ferri & Connor, 2005). Low-incidence disabilities, also named for their frequency, are less subjective (Hibel et al., 2010) and occur less often in the population. Examples include physical impairments, visual impairments, and hearing impairments (Ford et al., 2023a). These disabilities often utilize input or diagnosis from a medical professional, leave little room for teacher judgment, and do not rely on results

from IQ testing to determine eligibility (Ford et al., 2023a). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), during the 2022-2023 school year, 7,525,941 students with disabilities were enrolled in K-12 schools and served under IDEA. These students comprised 15.2% of the total school-age population, with 17.2% identifying as Black and 15.6% identifying as White (NCES, 2024b). Kramarczuk Voulgarides and colleagues (2024) shared that disproportionality most often exists in the categories of intellectual disability (ID), autism, emotional disturbance (ED), other health impairments, specific learning disabilities (SLD), and speech language impairments (SLI). Additional data from the NCES provides an example of the skewed proportions in disability categories, with 5.3% of Black students with ED and 8.7% with ID compared to the 4.3% of the total population of students with ED and the 5.8% with ID (NCES, 2024b). The differences between the percentages of Black students in the category types suggest that teacher bias and deficit thinking contribute to the overrepresentation (Ford et al., 2023a).

Historical Context of Black Students in Education

For decades, Black students have consistently been overrepresented in special education programs in the United States school system (Ford et al., 2023b; Green et al., 2020). OCR has documented student data since the 1970s, highlighting concerns related to providing equitable educational access for students and reviewing school compliance with civil rights policies (Ferri & Connor, 2005; OCR, 2021). In addition to being overidentified for special education programs, Black students, especially boys, are disproportionately disciplined in schools, experiencing exclusionary discipline practices at rates three times higher than their White classmates (Green et al., 2019; Toms et al., 2018). Exclusionary discipline practices include suspensions and expulsions. An out-of-school suspension is defined by a disciplinary occurrence that removes a student from their school temporarily, including in-person and virtual settings, for at least half of one school day, but does not equal or exceed the days remaining in the school year. Expulsions are:

> Actions taken by a local education agency to remove a student from his or her regular school (either in person or virtual) for disciplinary purposes, with or without the continuation of educational services, for the remainder of the school year or longer, in accordance with local education agency policy. Expulsions also include removals resulting from violations of the Gun Free Schools Act that are modified to less than 365 days. (OCR, 2021)

According to OCR (2021), during the 2020-21 school year, Black boys represented 15% of students who received one or more in-school suspensions, 18% of those who received one or more out-of-school suspensions, and 18% of those who were expelled, while representing just 8% of the total population of enrolled students.

Removing students from school as a disciplinary measure can lead to increases in absenteeism, which impacts a student's school attendance long-term. When compared to their White peers, Black students have higher dropout rates (Toms et al., 2018). For Black students attending schools in urban neighborhoods, their educational experiences are already impacted by additional factors, and the discipline gap is worse (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2015). An increase in the dropout rate directly impacts graduation rates, which are already lower for Black boys attending schools in urban neighborhoods (Jackson et al., 2021). The Schott Report on Black Males in Public Education highlights the lifelong benefits of high school graduation for Black boys, including a greater likelihood of participation in postsecondary education, higher weekly earnings, a decrease in the likelihood of incarceration, and improvements to physical health and well-being (The Schott Foundation for Public

Education, 2024). Excessive use of exclusionary discipline practices with Black boys puts these opportunities out of reach and have a direct impact on their success in education.

Understanding Black Students in Special Education

The educational disparities and unequal treatment of students based on race and ethnicity create a cause for concern (Bal et al., 2019), especially regarding disproportionality in special education programs. Ford and colleagues (2023) asserted "that deficit thinking by the predominant White education profession undermines the academic experiences, opportunities, and potential of Black boys" (p. 305). A student's placement in programs like gifted and special education directly impacts their educational outcomes. When Black boys are overrepresented in special education, especially for instances of misidentification, their access to the general curriculum is diminished, absenteeism increases, graduation rates decrease (Kern, 2015) and their postsecondary educational options are greatly reduced (Hines et al., 2023).

Over 50 years of research details the overrepresentation of Black students in special education as a critical issue (Tefera & Fischman, 2021). Overrepresentation often results in misidentification, placing students in special education classes who may not require those services. Racial stereotypes are prevalent in many institutions in the United States and K-12 schools are not exempt such that research has found that many students have had negative experiences with some form of discrimination in school, including overt racial discrimination (Brown & Bigler, 2005; Fu et al., 2022). According to Austin et al. (2024), "institutional racism is a reality that negatively affects several groups, particularly people of color, in the United States when it comes to important opportunities such as employment, credit, and education" (p. 3). Race has largely been used to categorize people, determining who is valuable and worthy and who is expendable (Annamma et al., 2013). From the 1600s to 1865, people of African descent were enslaved in America. Laws kept Black people from learning to read and write, and they were most often considered property, less than human (Banks, 2002). These compulsory ignorance laws and institutional racism are evidence of these influences. The legacy of American slavery is woven into the education system, perpetuating systemic inequities that impact the lives and classroom experiences of Black boys, especially those in special education. As such, teacher experiences and classrooms for this population are a critical part of how Black boys navigate K-12 special education.

Black Student Classroom and Teacher Experiences

Many classroom teachers acknowledge having an adequate level of preparedness to teach, but have less understanding of the importance of managing behaviors (Kerns, 2015). Academic and discipline referrals begin with the classroom teacher (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Those who lack the skills to effectively manage challenging behaviors are more likely to refer students for behavior concerns, including office discipline referrals and special education referrals. The criteria for judging normal behavior and normal academic progress are based on the typical performance of students who are "White, middle-class, monolingual, English-speaking and average-ability" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 1286). As such, referrals can also reflect a classroom teacher's implicit and explicit biases (Owens, 2022).

Teacher Bias in Educational Spaces

In many communities, in the United States and abroad, teachers are held to high ethical standards. Even so, the fact cannot be ignored that teachers' biases mirror those of the population. For example, Turetsky et al. (2021) found that teachers had "significantly more negative implicit attitudes towards marginalized groups than advantaged groups" (p. 698), which showed a consistent implicit preference for majority groups, and there was evidence of

anti-Black/pro-White explicit and implicit attitudes. Teacher bias contributes to disproportionality even if teachers do not believe they are prejudiced because "the pairing of Black faces and names with negative stimuli in the media has created and reinforced negative stereotypes that pervade American society" (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2015, p. 473). Teachers are led to underestimate the academic abilities of Black students and believe that they are less motivated to succeed (Turetsky et al., 2021). In a study from Anderson-Clark (2008), it was determined that uniquely named Black children were more likely to be discriminated against by peers and teachers. Teachers were more likely to rely on their stereotypes and biases to form their perceptions about these students and their academic and behavioral achievements.

According to Green et al. (2020), students with behavior challenges often have more teacher interactions than other students in the class. These frequent exchanges occur because teachers spend more time and attention addressing undesirable behaviors than they do praising students for exhibiting positive behaviors. The interactions are rarely positive or instructional in nature. Teachers decide what success and failure looks like at school and their perceptions can heavily influence student consequences for behavior (Anderson-Clark et al., 2008). Biased perceptions can lead to inaccurate referrals from poor classroom management and instructional practices. Repeatedly removing students from the classroom limits their access to the curriculum (Green et al., 2020). Stereotypes and microaggressions can serve as catalysts for defiant behaviors in students from underrepresented groups, impeding their participation and advancement in academic activities (Harrison-Bernard et al., 2020). Baker (2019) referenced the definition of microaggressions as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, verbal, and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of Blacks by offenders" (Pierce et al., 1977, p. 65, as cited in Baker, 2019). The aftereffects of these exchanges have been labeled as aversive and modern racism (Dovidio et al., 2016). Many microaggressions have led to academic misidentification (Jackson et al., 2020), exclusionary discipline practices, and a host of other challenges that Appreciative Advising strategies could alleviate or diminish.

Appreciative Advising as a Framework

As authors of this work, we name the experiences facing and challenging Black boys in special education, as they are critical to understanding the extent to which education must change. Education is much more than a classroom, textbooks, and learning. Education is the establishment of relationships and bonds that better support, advocate, and build up students and the next generation of our society. To center Black boys in special education, we offer Appreciative Advising as a strategy to better support their development. Appreciative Advising, as defined by Bloom and colleagues (2008), is the "intentional collaborative practice of asking generative, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (para. 2). Bloom et al. (2008) added, "appreciative advising addresses these concerns by establishing and celebrating a deeper personal relationship between advisors and students through an emphasis on the intrinsic ontological value of each student encountered" (pg. 7). Through the six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle, we seek to provide scholars, teachers, and educators with tools to assist and support this population.

Disarm is highlighted as making a positive first impression with students by Bloom et al. (2008). As the first phase in this framework, it situates both parties, as the student and the educator must first build rapport. What makes this phase unique and a critical part of the conversation for supporting students is that they often enter conversations with feelings of distrust (Warren, 2016; Warren et al., 2022). The second phase, *Discover,* invites educators to ask open-ended questions of the students with whom they are working. This phase is used to learn more about students' skills, strengths and abilities. For this population, having

conversations about strengths, skills, and abilities is critical as many Black boys are not often asked about their skills or abilities, leaving them to feel unmotivated about their education (Warren, 2016). The third phase, *Dream*, takes *Discover* to the next step as the educator asks the student about their hopes and aspirations. While McGee and Spencer (2015) found that parents can be great advocates and motivators for Black boys, educators also serve a vital role in this process.

Phase four, or *Design*, is used to co-create a plan with them to make their dreams a reality. *Deliver* or phase five, is an action phase. The student is using the plan that was co-created with the educator to make this plan a reality. The educator encourages and supports their student as this phase requires constant communication and commitment between both the educator and the student. The final phase, *"Don't Settle,"* is a collaboration between the educator and the student, as the process does not stop when the student reaches a level of success or achieves a particular goal. The process continues, as Bloom et al. (2008) explained, with a focus on "support and challenge" rather than "challenge and support." In this framing, Bloom et al. (2008) highlighted that in this format, students indeed gain more insight into what works best for them and how this can assist them in reaching their goals and potential. Building on these concepts and framing, we offer practical innovations on how Appreciative Advising could be applied to pedagogy and responsive teaching techniques.

Positionality and Connections to This Topic

We borrow the words, thoughts, and considerations of Beatty et al. (2020), who shared in an open letter to Black students, "You matter! Your very existence matters!... we wanted to remind you that you are seen, you are valued, you belong, and you are rooted" (Beatty, 2020, p. 9). As educators, scholars, and researchers dedicated to making our world a better place, this message highlights the feelings, emotions, and dreams we hold for Black students coming into educational spaces. Author one is a doctoral student whose research focuses on the disparities in special education, namely the overrepresentation of Black students. With over a decade of teaching experience in Title I elementary schools, her experiences as a Black teacher of Black students have shaped her desire to help preservice and in-service teachers create equitable learning environments for their students. Love (2019) references belonging and acceptance, both of which are essential to the educational success of Black boys. For them to truly belong, we must strive to embrace Black excellence and joy in all learning spaces by valuing their culture and celebrating the accomplishments of Black people.

Author two is a faculty member who has over 15 years of experience as a higher education professional, administrator, and educator. As a Black man who was once a Black boy, I approach this work as an educator who wants more for other Black boys in our society. In many ways, this article is dedicated to younger Black boys. In a world that often devalues, decenters, and causes Black boys to feel unseen and as if they do not belong. In a world where these realities are so overwhelming and even more challenging for Black boys in special education, we must approach this work with a level of care.

Pulling it All Together: Black Boys, Restorative Justice, and Appreciative Advising Approaches to Student Success

As education evolves, educators must approach supporting and teaching Black boys in special education in a different way. The challenges mentioned above offer many historical and traditional methods of thinking about the educational hardships facing the population. To address many of these challenges, we employed the Appreciative Advising framework to support and work with Black boys in special education. Although there are multiple methods

to consider for understanding how and why this is important, restorative justice has been identified as a way to center and support Black boys. Restorative justice practices are an "evidence-based approach that centers on student inclusion, authentic connections, and culturally responsive pedagogy" (Gwathney, 2021, p. 347). Implementing restorative justice practices in schools helps students learn to manage conflict, build trusting and respectful relationships, and develop a sense of safety and belonging (Lodi et al., 2022).

Utilizing the First Three Phases of Appreciative Advising

Appreciative Advising provides a distinctive framework for exploring restorative justice approaches. As part of the restorative justice approach, the initial phase of Appreciative Advising, known as *Disarm,* involves creating and facilitating inclusive and inviting environments for students. We adopt the Merriam-Webster (2011) definition of disarm, which means to deprive of means, reason, or disposition to be hostile. Although the process may vary among different populations, when it comes to Black males in special education, it entails not just establishing inclusive classroom environments, but also involving parents in the learning community. Parents are and continue to be an important part of the learning process for this population, and including parents within the Disarm phase can be seen as vital for their success. According to the Appreciative Advising framework (Bloom et al., 2008), first impressions are crucial in building relationships and are also vital in restorative justice work. To effectively engage in this work, both parents and students need to be equally involved in the process.

The second phase, named *Discover,* offers educators the opportunity to become familiar with Black boys who have faced challenges with teachers, administrators, and microaggressions. When considering alternative methods of achieving justice and examining the experiences of Black boys in special education, it is important to inquire about their encounters in educational environments through open-ended inquiries. To establish trust and gain an in-depth understanding of each student's abilities, it is essential to recognize and comprehend the challenges they face in the classroom. This step enables the educator to gain an in-depth understanding of the student as a whole individual, to more fully appreciate their interests and passions.

The aim of Phase Three, known as Dream, is to help students envision their future and establish life and career aspirations. This phase helps students to shift their focus from their current identity to their potential future identity. During this phase of education for Black males in special education, it frequently involves encouraging them to expand their thinking and aspirations. Historical obstacles within American society have a direct impact on the educational experiences of Black males, which can influence their aspirations, as it can be challenging to envision themselves pursuing various professional pathways (Ford et al., 2023b; Jackson et al., 2020, 2021). This phase, like the others, allows educators to truly assist students to see beyond what they know.

Facilitating the Last Three Phases of Appreciative Advising

Understanding Culturally and Sustaining Practices (CSP) is essential for how educators think about the last three phases of working with Black boys. Black boys in special education are placed in restrictive settings more often than their White peers, limiting their access to the general education curriculum and inclusive learning environments (Annamma et al., 2013; Cruz et al., 2021). CSP enables and encourages the utilization and preservation of students' cultural practices from their own homes within the educational environment. CSP encourages students to not only be immersed in the culture of their classroom but also in the lifestyle of the place they call home. CSP builds upon the three pillars of Ladson-Billings'

(1995) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and culturally responsive teaching: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Special educators implementing CSP support students by maintaining high expectations, building positive relationships, and supporting Black students' identities through social justice practices (Sebastian, 2023). They see value in Black culture and incorporate it into students' daily learning (Freeman-Green et al., 2021), post-secondary goals, and transition services. When teachers employ CSP, they see Black boys, their families, and their culture as assets in the learning environment, eliminating any space for deficit thinking.

The fourth phase of the Appreciative Advising framework, referred to as *Design*, aims to support students in establishing clear and realizable goals that can be accomplished over time. When it comes to Black boys in special education, it is important to take into account the need for culturally sustaining behaviors when planning for their future. The historical origins of Black individuals in the field of education often result in Black boys having distinct cultural backgrounds compared to their White peers. Supporting Black males in special education necessitates acknowledging and incorporating the cultural aspects of their Black heritage, which are frequently acquired within their homes and form an integral part of their individual identities. Therefore, it is imperative to take into account how this process manifests in the classroom.

Phase five, *Deliver*, goes beyond the phase of envisioning and collaboratively establishing an action plan. Deliver is a reciprocal process involving the educator and the student, which motivates the student to progress towards achieving their goals. At this level, it is crucial to communicate to students that it is acceptable to encounter difficulties. Students frequently encounter obstacles when pursuing their goals. There are often roadblocks for students as they navigate the pursuit and attainment of their goals. In the context of education, the *Deliver* phase frequently involves serving as a source of motivation, particularly for Black boys, who have been found to face multiple challenges in K-12 schooling. Unlike the previous phases, this phase necessitates educators to engage in critical thinking regarding the nature of support and the most effective means of achieving it.

The sixth phase, known as the *Don't Settle* phase, is the final and crucial phase, where parents should be strongly encouraged to actively engage with their children. This phase is often used to provide ongoing support to pupils while simultaneously encouraging them to reach their full potential. The concept of challenge and support (Patton et al., 2016), commonly utilized in higher education settings, has been recognized as an effective approach to navigate this phase. Educators must balance pushing students to achieve their maximum capabilities and providing them with the necessary assistance and guidance to do so. To address the needs of Black boys in special education, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach that involves both parents and teachers. This process necessitates a holistic approach, which the Appreciative Advising framework affords.

Conclusion

In recent years, K-12 educators and education scholars have identified critical hope as a possible solution to the educational inequalities that frequently affect underprivileged, marginalized populations (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), such as Black boys in special education. As we consider methods to support Black boys in special education, Appreciative Advising, Restorative Justice approaches, and Culturally Sustaining Practices should not be viewed as individual approaches, but rather as complementary methods that must be integrated and utilized to expand knowledge and practices, ultimately enhancing support for Black boys in special education. We structured this article to assist educators with new ways of thinking about special education and a population that desperately needs attention. As we start to

reimagine special education, this scholarship has implications for higher education and K-12 education as we rethink what works and how it all can be done better.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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