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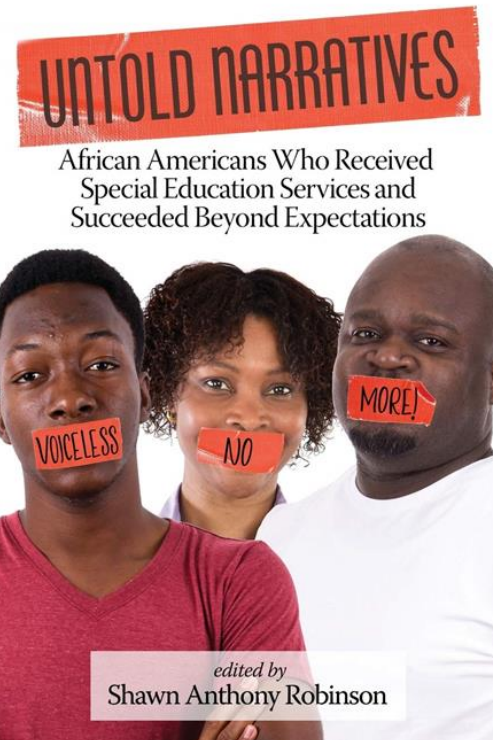
Robinson, S. A. (Ed.). (2018). *Untold narratives: African Americans who received special education services and succeeded beyond expectations*. Information Age Publishing.

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Dr. Shawn Anthony Robinson presents a collection of narratives from African Americans who succeeded in special education, despite the difficulties and deficit perspectives presented by both teachers and the educational system. In this edited volume, Robinson bookends these narratives with introductory material that recounts his own experiences, creatively communicated through autoethnographic poetry, along with a brief history of special education law and systemic racism through the lens of critical race theory, and a discussion of cultural classroom capital and a call to action. The cover pictures three African Americans with a gleam of happiness in their eye starkly contrasted by the literal red tape over their mouths. However, the covert message relayed on the tape reads, “Voiceless no more!” The spirit of this message is transformed through the narrative of individual life stories, in which the metaphorical tape hindering their voice is removed. Robinson’s hope is that the stories held within may give “current students in special education reasons to rejoice” (p. xiii).



The chapters of this volume are authored by contributors ranging from academic scholars to community activists. Dr. Aaliyah Baker, an assistant professor in the College of Education and Leadership at Cardinal Stritch University, begins the collection with a foreword and call for critical reflection

and action to achieve equity in education. The Fulbright-Hays grant recipient draws attention to the idea of intersectionality as it applies to each narrative in terms of ability, class, gender, and race attributing this intersectional work to both Connor (2006) and Gillborn (2015). Intersectionality, with its roots in Black feminist theory, holds that societies intentionally neglect to acknowledge the complexities and interconnectedness of multiple oppressions, “so that struggles are categorized as singular issues ... this structure imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces the status quo” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 167). The policies and practices of special education involve not just ability but a complex interwoven dialogue of social class, gender, race, and more as well. The narratives presented in this collection are not just a reflection of special education or schools. They are instead complex accounts of the experiences as Black, dis/abled, sometimes poor, men and women in an education system shaped by *de facto* segregation held up by an unrealistic ideal of meritocracy.

To ground the self-identified autoethnographic and narrative accounts that follow, Jody Field and Kristie Roberts-Lewis present a brief history of education policy that has shaped present day special education law in the US. The contributors begin with a critique of the compulsory education laws in the 1800s and the lack of state uniformity that gave way to subsequent failed policy decisions. The historical chapter recounts multiple court cases in special education beginning with the 1893 Massachusetts Court decision allowing the expulsion of children with disabilities. The account eventually reaches 1988 when *Honig v. Doe* enforced the “stay put” clause thus eliminating the legal possibility of expulsion. Landmark policies, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Education for All Handicap Children Act of 1975, the 1990 reauthorization under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the 2016 IDEA Part B regulation are noted in chronological detail in ways that can inform those who are not well-versed in special education. Field and Roberts-Lewis frame this historical account to demonstrate how the inception of public policies negatively impacted differently abled individuals and “demonized their presence as a distraction to the instruction of other students” (p.15).

Following the historical timeline, Saran Stewart and David Kennedy detail a Black educator’s narrative that addresses racialized structural segregation in special education. Through the lens of critical race theory, Kennedy, as the participant-researcher, provides insight to his experience as a Black special education teacher where he fought against a school system that was saturated with race-based inequities. He recounts his experience in a Midwest classroom where the education philosophy kept special education children isolated from their peers in the same room. Kennedy fought to include his students into the general education classroom, recounting a story of critical hope through a student named Daryl. Despite Kennedy’s pursuit of equity for his students, he reports feeling expendable as a Black educator surrounded by a predominately white faculty while “witnessing the degradation of his character, expertise and Blackness as a means of silencing and oppression” (p. 29).

After the brief historical introduction and teacher narrative, Robinson devotes the next two sections of the text to centering the voices of both African American men and women in special education. The stories touch on a variety of settings extending from the 1970s to the early 2000s, from Maryland to California. The narratives provide accounts under the IDEA's umbrella categories of emotional disability, learning disability, visual impairment, dysgraphia, ADHD, and otosclerosis. As way of introduction, Robinson recounts that he originally wanted to include 12 chapters of narrative but later decided that quantity was not as important: "what mattered to me was the quality of voices sharing their stories in ways that could reach the current students in the special education system and their parents who felt hopeless or excluded" (p. xiv). Of the six narratives that became part of his edited book, Robinson's stated purpose and intended audience is made apparent. The narratives within are meant to provide hope to both parents and Black students defined by special education labels that may feel excluded or rejected. The anthology inspires those frequently marginalized through deficit perspectives to identify their true academic potential and gives them reasons to celebrate.

One such example encompasses an African-American male's experience in a small-town special education system in Virginia. Ronnie Nelson Sidney reflects on his time in school being labeled as a hyperactive child with poor written and organization skills while rejecting the notion of learning disabled altogether. "To me, the stigma of being placed in special education was greater than my academic and behavioral challenges" (p. 72). Sidney secretly navigated his way through a system as stealthily as a ninja to hide his special education label from his classmates. Despite having been viewed as incapable by his teachers, as an adult Sidney is successful and uses his voice to help students navigate their way through a system that is riddled with deficit perspectives. In 2015 Sidney published his first graphic novel *Nelson Beats the Odds*, in which the main character is created in the author's own likeness. Nelson, the African American protagonist, is a ninja secretly hiding his own ADHD diagnosis who later becomes empowered by his potential. Sidney's fictional narrative offers positivity to those who may fear the label of a special education or mental health disorder.

While race and disability are axes of identity for each narrative, not all of the stories recount racists' experiences in detail. There are various sociocultural identities such as religious, class, and gender dynamics that are poignant in the authors' stories. Some narratives read as academic accounts grounded in the literature and theoretical frameworks, while others were personal reflections of experiences with ableism. Theories such as critical race theory, Black liberation theology, conflict theory, and DisCrit appear throughout the various chapters. Interestingly, one author, self-identified as a liberation theologian, defines his own theoretical lens thus: "I work from a theology of hope and a hermeneutics of suspicion" (p. 65).

Despite the differences in each narrative, the reader can deduce thematic similarities. First, each story illustrates the difficulties faced whether they be the label of special education, the perceived limitation of the disability, the

pervasiveness of racism, or the infamous deficit-minded teacher who told them they could not succeed. Secondly, each story relates a “happy ending” of the academic success and accomplishment of the Black individual with disabilities. Regardless of the difficulties faced, the contributors' accomplishments include becoming academic scholars, professors, activists, authors, ministers, editors, poets, entrepreneurs, teachers and more. The success of each person is the connecting thread. Despite the harmful messaging they received from the education system they relied on, they nonetheless flourished.

Narrative inquiry allows for personal stories to exemplify and expound the lived experiences using both research and literature (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). *Untold Narratives* conveys the experiences of African Americans who, in navigating a special education system that told them they couldn't succeed, did succeed in spite of systemic inequalities. These individual experiences correspond to critiques of the alarming and disproportionate number of students of color being served through the special education system (Beratan, 2008; Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Kliner, 2006; Jordan, 2005 as cited in Robinson, 2018). Finally, these narratives challenge the overrepresentation of Black students in special education, as each story conveys themes of success in pursuit of more inclusive environments, educational freedom, and higher post-secondary expectations.

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About the Reviewer

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