Using Positionality to Amplify a Black Mother's Voice [in Special Education]

Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

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TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will feature the Center's Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems. Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation, and quality education for historically marginalized students, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

David: Hello everyone, my name is Dr. David Hernández-Saca and I'm an Assistant Professor at the University of Northern Iowa. I have with me today two amazing colleagues, Shehreen Iqtardar and Joyce Levingston. I've known Joyce for about a year now and we will talk about her son Cedric, who I had a pleasure of meeting, who came to one of the courses that I taught here at UNI, on Learning Disabilities, Emotion and Culture. And I've had a chance to have Joyce as my grad student there, and we immediately clicked and became friends and comrades. And Shereen Iqtardar is a grad student of mine as well. And we had an opportunity to co-teach last semester and we're co-planning this semester within our department of Special Ed, introductory courses for our teacher candidates here. And today's podcast is called, *Using Positionality to Amplify a Black Mother's Voice*. And I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

Joyce: Okay, so I will begin. Thanks for the introduction Dr. David. Talking about my son Cedric…so I just want people to imagine trying to help your child, but you aren't able to. And you're trying everything in your might to help them, and you're just not able to help them. And it's not because you don't have the money. It's not because you don't

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have the time. It's not because you don't have the resources. But it's because of a larger system that is actually built against not only you, but your child as well.

Joyce: So, Cedric he, and just some backstory, Cedric is the youngest of my four children. He attended the same elementary school that I went to, that his three sisters went to as well, that all my siblings attended. So there was a lot of trust built up in this school that he attended. Just to let you know a little bit about Cedric as well, basically, he started struggling, from the very first day that he entered into school. People often ask me, "did Cedric go to daycare," or "did he go to preschool?" And the answer is yes. Cedric did go to daycare, from the time he was, you know, about four weeks old. He also did attend preschool prior to going to school as well, and never had any problems or issues with either one of those.

Joyce: But from the first day of kindergarten, Cedric seemed very gloomy when it was time to walk into the school building. I just remember the first day, the principal and I kind of carrying him, you know into the school building together.

Joyce: Over the course of the next three years or four, until he became, you know, got into third grade, me and Cedric Sr. had a lot of phone calls from the school, or a lot of times where we had to go up to the school to help Cedric, or to intervene in something that was going on. So, a lot of times the school would do things like just call us and say, "hey you know we can't get him to calm down" or "Cedric is crying" or "Cedric is not listening." Or just always questioning basically, "what is wrong with your child?"

Joyce: So we would do all of the things that the school would suggest for us to do. We took him to the doctor. We put him in therapy, we put him in behavioral therapy, play therapy. One of the hardest things that I've had to do as a mom is give my child a medication that, in my opinion, was just very scary to do or that I felt that he didn't

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need. But the school suggested, and also our family doctor suggested, that he tried ADHD medication. I think this was to get him to sit calmly in class during the day. Well, I fought for about a year, and you know we can only miss so much work and only leave work early so many times, and we were doing that about four days out of the five work week, you know the work days of the week. So finally I gave in and I allowed Cedric to take a medication for ADHD.

Joyce: So, after a couple months of doing so, quickly began to realize that Cedric's behavior was not changing, even on the medication. So that's something that was discontinued, and we would still get these phone calls, and I just remember one time a teacher asking if he was disrespectful at home. When I asked her exactly what she meant by that she stated, "Well he won't stand for the Pledge of Allegiance!" I just remember looking at her face and she seemed so upset by that.

Joyce: So when I asked Cedric why he didn't stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, he had responded to me that "it was something that just wasn't for him." Cedric would also write in a journal to communicate with me because sometimes when we picked him up and he would just be crying, we just felt so bad for him that we didn't bring up what was going on. We just didn't talk about it, and he would write down things like "they wanted me to touch other people's ears" or "they wanted me to hold hands with someone."

Joyce: Cedric just had a hard time wanting to do these things, and I think that largely what we ended up finding out is that, you know, they had created, through rumors, they had created a label for my son. Through some of his behaviors from him having some, you know, anxious moments at school, they would describe him as, you know, "violent" and or as you know "disruptive." And these labels kind of stuck with him and the rumors spread throughout the teachers at the school. I know that because when

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he got into third grade, that is when the teacher had emailed me the first week of school and said, “You know, I know that you guys have been struggling for years. What can I do to help?” So I finally responded back, “What type of help is there?” Like, “what do you do for these students?” I know my son is, I know this isn't situational like what can we do? So that's when we started talking about having him go into special education. Which at first sounded great to me because I'm thinking, “great, my son is in a small classroom.” I don't have to worry about, you know, getting the phone calls. I don't have to, you know, worry about maybe him being anxious or him having to do all these other things.

Joyce: So before we even had an IEP meeting, they actually moved him into the special education classroom, immediately. So to me it's something that maybe they had, already in the back of their mind, hoped for. But I also had got a personal message from one of the educators that worked there that said that she went into the teachers’ lounge and she heard I was in the office. So she was going to come and say hi to me. And that when she listened to the conversation, that they were speaking about my son, and that they were calling him, things like “disruptive” and “aggressive” and violent.” I think that those rumors created a barrier for my son to have the type of education that my daughters had.

Joyce: That was just having friends, making friends, and also being in a space where they weren't policed. My son was very much over-policed, over-watched by educators that didn't even have him as a student. He would always be watched. If someone saw him in the hallway, like going to use the restroom, or going to get a drink. I got a call one time saying that he splashed water on another student when he was going to get a drink at the drinking fountain. I'm thinking, “my goodness! My son has no friends at school.” He's never been able to have a friend. He's in fourth grade, maybe him splashing water at the drinking fountain is his you know his way, if nothing else has

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worked, you know, maybe this is his way of just playing because that's what kids do: they play.

Joyce: Once I brought up race as a reason why Cedric was being treated the way he was treated, then everything just went downhill. My parental participation was seen as me being aggressive. They would try to police-tone me in our meetings, all of a sudden. They wanted to say that, you know, just the way that they received my parental participation had changed a lot. And they, you know, highly displayed White Fragility.

Joyce: And I would tell them this like, "I am being met with White Fragility." Now that I'm bringing up race and, you know, pointing out the systemic and institutionalized racism that is happening. My son, not allowed to, you know, embrace his culture at this school. He couldn't dance. He couldn't rap. They would say that he was mumbling if he was rapping, even though he was, you know, involved in hip-hop literacy in the summertime.

Joyce: In the school education system that was close to ours that was more diverse, Cedric would be involved in these things, and the school system that was predominantly white, would have an issue with that. So it's just been a struggle. And I remember when he was in third grade, he missed 80 days of school. Here, where we live, that's illegal. I never got a notice, I never…and this is before he had an IEP. However, I had a child in high school, who would skip school sometimes and I would get a threatening letter saying that my child was truant, my child…I would have to pay a fine.

Joyce: This is how I really began to realize they don't want my son in the school system, and they care about children differently. So I feel like Cedric just had a big target on him because he was a Black boy, who loved being a Black boy, and loved you know dancing, rapping, making beats. Football, basketball, and maybe did have some

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issues with school-induced anxiety. We took him to some highly professional people and got him evaluated because they're constantly telling us, “something's wrong with him.” And those were the results: that he had school-induced anxiety, and I think that came over a time of, like I said to him, just being overly judged and labeled at the school. So it's been quite the experience.

Shehreen: Thank you so much, Joyce. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us. I think it's extremely important for, you know, as a society, for us to listen to the voices of all of us who are being affected by the system. So thank you so much for sharing your story.

I think some of the things that you shared, and I would like to highlight for all of us, are really…you mentioned that Cedric was placed in a special education classroom before the first IEP meeting. That right there is going against IDEA, which is *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, even if we are thinking, when we are thinking about providing resources to children before, you know…when we are making placement decisions for students. I think that there is a parental participation violation of their right to participate in the IEP meeting. And a decision was being made for Cedric before you sitting in that meeting, and sharing your concerns. Listening to your voice.

Shehreen: One of the other issues I think you brought in, which is very timely and very important, is the issue of disproportionality. And there has been a huge…there is some literature that speaks about this. That students of Color, by disproportionality I mean, when students of Color are over-represented within certain special education categories. And literature suggests that Black students, Black male students, are over-represented within the categories of “emotional behavior disorder” and Latino students are over-represented within “learning disability” categories. So race is linked

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with all of that. So you are right on it when you share that you did feel that probably his race was coming in, when decisions were being made for him or when rumors were spread about him. It was definitely through that racial paradigm lens as well.

Shehreen: And I think one of the other things that I really want to comment on is what, as educators, we can do? Like we all work in the school system, be it higher education or be it you know K-12. I think as educators, one of the big big things is understanding and knowing what is our positionality within the system, where do we stand in the system. Not only as being a teacher, but also being which race we belong to, which identities we carry in the system that may privilege us or may disadvantage us. And when we are making decisions for our students, are we thinking from those positionalities? What hidden or master narratives do we carry in our hearts and minds about all the different, you know, for example, in this situation, I'd say different races in the system.

Shehreen: So I think as educators we need to be aware of what literature is suggesting, and we need to be aware of listening to parents' voices and listening to students' voices. Being aware of literature, when I say that I mean, being aware of that our students of Color are being over-represented in certain special education categories as I just mentioned.

Shehreen: So when we are making referrals, or when we are making decisions around the "subjective" special education categories, we need to really account for our individual, sometimes biases as well, based off of how we understand the culture, how we understand different races, how we…what point of views we are bringing in the system that might affect our students in the longer run when we are making decisions for them. So I think it's, wrapping it up, it's extremely important to include parent voice, it's extremely important to listen to what they have to share because

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ultimately they're the ones who are spending most of their time with the student. And I think, at the same, time it's extremely important for us as educators to align with the parents. And it goes vice versa: we need to we need parents, when they share their stories, when they bring their concerns, so that we can work in collaboration for all our students, and not buy into sometimes our own personal biases and hidden sources of information that we bring in the system, or we enter the system with. So thank you so much again for sharing your story.

David: Thank you, Joyce, so much for your story and for sharing about your experiences as a Black mother in our educational system, because historically the discourses of schooling and special education have resisted such analysis around race and disability. And I'm reflecting as a teacher educator here at the University of Northern Iowa, that it is so important that our pre-service and in-service teachers, and all stakeholders, really take in your story and the struggles that you have gone through and even in the opening in you sharing those.

David: I loved the way you framed them not as being located in Cedric, or in you. And I will even go further and say in the Black community—or in Black, Indigenous and people of Color communities, because of the power relations that have been underscored since the beginning of our nation. I think that historical consciousness is so important for all stakeholders to realize regarding the way in which interactions get played out in the life-chances for Black, Indigenous and people of Color youth. And right now Shehreen and I, and Joyce, have really worked together to bring to our pre-service teachers here at UNI, Joyce's story, and I'm so glad that we're doing it within this podcast, so it can reach audiences across the United States.

David: And one thing that Joyce brought about was this notion of parental participation and since we have federal laws around principles of IDEA, where there is zero reject,

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evaluation, free appropriate public education, the least-restrictive environment, procedural safeguards. And the last one is parental participation, and how you experienced the educational system, Joyce, was really against the law. But we want to make sure we also train our teachers, and think about our audience members listening today, that what's institutionalized oftentimes did not take into account Black, Indigenous, and people of Colors' voices about what has been written into the law.

David: And I think for implications, that's something I look forward to. I know that a lot of my colleagues look forward to re-feeling, re-thinking, re-defining, and re-valuing Black, Indigenous and people of Colors' voices about what has been institutionalized, because if we don't, we will run the risk of reproducing dominant ideologies that are based on white and ability supremacy.

David: And so I think it's really important to talk about the moral and spiritual dimension of being an educator. That really connects back to what Shrehreen was talking about, and what you were illuminating for us, Joyce, regarding how you felt and how Cedric felt, regarding your interactions with the educational system. And so this is just the beginning of a larger conversation that we are also having as a nation and internationally around Black Lives Matter. So thank you for your time and energy. I really appreciate this time to feel and think together.

Joyce: Yeah, and thank you for, you know thank the both of you for engaging in the conversation, and I look forward to more discussion, Cedric's story. Like I said now he's in fifth grade. So there's a lot to Cedric's story that I believe we have to share with others and, you know, hopefully with our next talk we can get into more of discussing parental participation, and more properties of whiteness, and White

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Fragility, and white privilege, and what that looks like within the education system as well. Thank you.

Shehreen: Yeah, I agree. And thank you both for coming together and having this discussion. And Joyce, thank you so much again for sharing your story. Because I think it's extremely important for all of us. And thank you, Dr. David Hernández -Saca for bringing us all together to discuss something that is very timely and very important and historical. And we need to be comfortable navigating the system sometimes. Thank you.

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