Sherron Grant- Black Experiences and Disabled Childhoods Event

10 minutes 52 seconds

Sherron: Okay, so, who am I? You can see this is the love of my life- no, not my partner, but my son, Isaiah and, he's really the reason why I'm here this evening. So, I'm a parent of a young adult and that was my son Isaiah who's 25 years old, and he is on the Autism spectrum. As was also mentioned, I'm an elementary school principal, co-founder of the Black parent support group and the reasoning for forming this group is just with regard to the experiences that I had as a parent attending different workshops, support groups and so on, and being in those spaces and really not seeing a lot of racialized people in those spaces. Over the years I would meet different families repeatedly and we would talk- you know, it would be nice if we could have a group for us and by us. Because it's always great to attend the groups and you get a lot of information but there's a whole other level when you yourself are Black and you're raising a Black child and navigating the system- there's a whole other set of experiences and unfortunately, challenges and obstacles that come with that lived experience. So, as was mentioned in November 2020, my husband and I founded this group. We since changed the name to Sawubona and the group continues to grow and meet needs. Some of the sharing I will share with all of you this evening are comments and the conversations that we have with the parents in the group and their experiences. As was also mentioned, I'm an advocate- I mean you can't help it when you're raising a child with any type of an exceptionality. You want to be able to share, you want to be able to support and you want to be able to share what you've done that works and help others that you see who may see struggling that give them those additional tools that you know you wish you had but you gained them over the years, so you share those with others. I also, once this pandemic is over, once I get the opportunity, I love to travel and see new places, I love to eat and because I love to eat, I love to go to the gym and I'm also a grandmother. So, I will be responding to a few questions that were asked just to get me thinking about my participation this evening. So, question number 1. What do I think it means to be Black and to have a Black disabled identity? So, on the positive, now both identities are taken to account and there's an understanding that there are needs for you as being a Black person- a Black presenting person as well as needs with regards to your disability. On the not so positive side of all of this is there can unfortunately be further marginalization because of that intersection of identity specifically, in the area of race, the Black race and ability. Therefore, it may mean there may be a bit more work to be seen and to be valued in multiple spaces and those spaces may include the disabled community on a whole, the Black community on a whole, and the dominant culture on a whole which, unfortunately, we don't necessarily see ourselves represented as someone living at the intersection of race and disability. So, it is a little bit more work and advocacy and it can be a struggle to be seen and to have your needs met and your voice heard. So, the next question. In your lived experience as a parent of a child with Autism, and as an educator and school principal, what do I think is unique about Black family experiences with a disability and what do I think is unique about Black disabled childhoods? So again, I go back to those negative and deficit-based assumptions. You know with- in raising my son who has what we call an invisible disability, I find- or my perception is that when the disability is more physical, when there's more seen, so that person you know perhaps is blind and low-vision- so they're walking with a stick or they're in a wheelchair or, perhaps there's some other physical showing or presentation that person has a challenge. When that person is living with an invisible disability there can be an assumption that person may know what they're doing and rather than looking at the environment, rather than asking questions, rather than digging a little bit deeper, there are assumptions that are made, and those assumptions tend to unfortunately be on the negative side. So, for example, for children there might be more punitive measures used in dealing with those children and not necessarily for the dominant group. So again, when we go back to years ago in the school boards where there was a zero tolerance for certain types of behaviours when you look at a lot of those statistics children who were racialized, definitely Black children, as well as with a disability unfortunately that zero tolerance did not work in their favour. Sorry just trying to- unfortunately there's needed information that's out there but sometimes that information's not shared with Black families as freely. There seems to be a little bit more work that needs to be done for families to gain access to that information. I did mention about the invisible disabilities and the assumption that there's more malice and intent versus the possible obstacles and challenges that may stand in the way of that child reaching their full potential and therefore, unfortunately, that child or that family can be pathologized (inaudible, 6:18) the assumption that 'well, the family isn't doing enough, the family doesn't care-' and again, these are things I'm hearing from many of the families in our support group that we meet with on a regular basis. In some of the situations, some of the parents who are raising these children on their own, especially as single mothers they have shared that sometimes they walk into spaces, and they feel that judgement. They feel that assumption that they don't have anything to give back to the system and they are there only to take. There's an assumption perhaps that they are uneducated, that they don't have knowledge when that is not the case at all but unfortunately they've had to give up their careers or put their careers on the backburner to put in that more effort in order to support their child but those questions aren't asked and that time isn't taken to get to know what that family's really going through and to offer those supports and connect them with the resources in the community so they can get the supports that they need to better support their child. So, in pulling things together, the question was also asked how are these unique experiences, that I've just given you a window into, how are those shaped by early childhood education, care, and intervention programs and the schooling system? How can early intervention programs be culturally safe for Black families? Well, there's a few points that I've thought about number one being representation matters. It can be very intimidating when you're surrounded, whether it be in a special needs agency, whether it be seeking funding for your child, whether it be in the school system and you don’t see anybody that looks like you or that can understand or relate to your cultural background and the obstacles that may lay in your way. So, agencies, school systems need to do a better job of having more representation in their staffing, in their outreach, in their response to families and when we’re talking about representation we also want to ensure that the people we’re working with understand community, understand that Black culture is not homogenous it is a diaspora and where there may be much that we do have in common there is also a lot that is different amongst the different cultures within the Black and African community and that research that understanding needs to take place. When we’re responding to families the work needs to be student-centred and student needs centred in response and with regards to the strategies and interventions that are suggested. In so doing, we need to also remember- and I’m jumping from my bottom point here- that we need to partner with caregivers, parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and respect them as the first teachers and the experts in the raising and support of their child regardless of whatever letters they may have after their name. They still know a lot- they have a lot they can offer in supporting their loved one. Early intervention is so key but again, these families need to know what is possible and they need all of the support that they can get so that their loved one can get as much early intervention as they need in order to increase their outcomes later on in life and of course partnering with culturally reflective agencies. They’re out there. We need to search them out, we need to partner with them. We need to have that humility to ask questions and to understand that we don’t have all of the answers and they might not have all of the answers either but when we put our heads together, when like minds come together and put those ideas together, I am sure that amazing things can happen. So, this is just a little flyer about our group that meets twice a month. Again, part of the reason in putting this group together is as a parent myself, I wasn’t really seeing- there’s agencies out there but not agencies that are necessarily dealing with that intersection of Blackness and of disability. Right now, we’re finding it’s needing quite a need within the Black community and definitely within the families that have reached out to us. This is our contact information and I thank you for your attention.