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Nested Safe Spaces: An Intersectional, Disability Justice Approach to Supporting Black Neurodivergent Students attending HBCUs*

Espacios seguros anidados: un enfoque interseccional y de justicia para las personas con discapacidad para apoyar a estudiantes negros neurodivergentes que asisten a universidades históricamente negras (HBCU)

Mma anasü süpüla atumaa: wane jukuwa'ipa sa'aka asirúajirawaa sulu'u naatawaa akuwa'ipaa otta pa'anapajirawaa pütchi namüin na wayuu kapülaasükana e'raajaa süpüla katsuinjirawaa pütchi namüin na ekirajaanakana mmaipaa katsuiipünaasü saa'in chayaa ekirajiipalee laülaasü mmaipaa (HBCU)

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Abstract

Informed by intersectionality and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), this study uses narrative inquiry to explore how the colonial constructs of racism and ableism intersect to shape Black neurodivergent students' experiences at a historically Black university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Although HBCUs serve as culturally affirming spaces grounded in Black identity, they often operate within ableist paradigms that marginalize disabled and neurodivergent students. In response, community members, faculty, and Black disabled students created PALS (Peer Allies for Learning and Support), a peer-led mentoring initiative designed to build "nested safe spaces." Using an intersectional lens, this qualitative study draws on semi-structured interviews student mentors and mentees. Key themes include students expressing a need for schools to use intersectional identity affirmation and provide opportunities for peer mentorship and emotional support. Findings suggest that

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peer-led, disability-affirming spaces serve as critical infrastructures for advancing intersectional inclusion at HBCUs, illustrating how student-driven initiatives can challenge ableist norms and foster more supportive campus environments for students at the nexus of race and neurodivergence.

Keywords: Black education, Higher Education, Inclusion, historically Black Colleges and Universities, Neurodivergence.

Resumen

Orientado por la interseccionalidad y la Teoría Crítica Racial de la Discapacidad (DisCrit), este estudio emplea la investigación narrativa para explorar cómo los constructos coloniales del racismo y el capacitismo se intersecan y configuran las experiencias de estudiantes negros neurodivergentes en una universidad históricamente negra ubicada en la región del Atlántico Medio de los Estados Unidos. Aunque las universidades históricamente negras (HBCU) funcionan como espacios culturalmente afirmativos fundamentados en la identidad negra, con frecuencia operan dentro de paradigmas capacitistas que marginan a los estudiantes con discapacidad y neurodivergentes. En respuesta a esta situación, miembros de la comunidad, docentes y estudiantes negros con discapacidad crearon PALS (Peer Allies for Learning and Support), una iniciativa de mentoría entre pares diseñada para construir "espacios seguros anidados". Desde una perspectiva interseccional, este estudio cualitativo se basa en entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a estudiantes mentores y aprendices. Entre los principales temas identificados se encuentra la necesidad expresada por los estudiantes de que las instituciones educativas reconozcan y afirmen las identidades interseccionales, así como de que ofrezcan oportunidades de mentoría entre pares y apoyo emocional. Los hallazgos sugieren que los espacios liderados por pares y orientados a la afirmación de la discapacidad constituyen infraestructuras fundamentales para promover la inclusión interseccional en las HBCU. Asimismo, muestran cómo las iniciativas impulsadas por los propios estudiantes pueden cuestionar las normas capacitistas y fomentar entornos universitarios más solidarios para quienes se encuentran en la intersección entre la raza y la neurodivergencia.

Palabras clave: educación de la población negra, educación superior, inclusión, universidades históricamente negras, neurodivergencia.

Jüküjia palitpütchiru'u

Sulu'u tü ashajajkat pütchi yaa, waashajain sünain tü asirúajirawaa sulu'u naatawaa akuwa'ipaa otta tü pütchi DisCrit sa'aka kapülaa e'raajaa, tü achajawaakat pütchi joolu'u saashajain jukuwa'ipa alijunairu'u mmaipaa otta capacitismo eekai eipajüin pütchi katsuinsükat namüin na ekirajaanakana mmaipaa katsuiipünaasü saa'in chayaa ekirajiipalee laülaasü mmaipaa (HBCU) chayaa Estados Unidos. Ja'itairü na ekirajiipaleekana HBCU ewiichijirain pütchi sa'aka jukuwa'ipa wayuu mmaipaa, wattasü saalin a'yatawaa sa'aka capacitismo eekai süpülajain na ekirajaanakana eekai kapülaan otta neurodivergentes.Süpüleerua kapülaa e'raajaa tiakat, na wayuukana mmaipaa, ekirajüshiikana otta ekirajaanaka eekai kapülaan eitaashi tü a'yatawaakat PALS, wane pa'anapajirawaa pütchi namaa na wayuu laülaayuuka süpüla eitaa "mma anasü süpüla atumaa". Süka tü pütchi asirúajirawaa sulu'u naatawaa akuwa'ipaa, tü achajawaakat pütchi joolu'u sa'akajee asakajawaa pütchi namüin na ekirajaanakana. Tü achajawaakat pütchi e'raajashi sünainchoo achuntajakat namüin na ekirajaanakana süpüla na ekirajiipaleekana e'raajüinjatüin jukuwa'ipa asirúajirawaa sulu'u naatawaa akuwa'ipaa, otta sa'atajajin wakuwa'ipa joolu'u sa'aka pa'anapajirawaa pütchi otta kapülaa saa'in wayuu. Tü achajawaakat pütchi e'raajashi sünain tü mma eitaasü sa'aka na ekirajaanakana katsuinjirashi pütchi süpüla ekirajawaa ewiichikana chayaa HBCU joolu'u.

Pütchi katsuinsükat: Pütchi katsuinsükat: ekirajawaa namüin na wayuu mmaipaa, ekirajiipalee laülaasü, ekirajawaa ewiichikana, HBCU, neurodivergencia.

Introduction

Western schooling systems were built around a narrow and exclusionary idea of the "normal" student, one expected to learn, behave, speak, and succeed according to dominant colonial standards rooted in white, Western, English-speaking, individualistic, and able-bodied norms (Blantchett, 2010). Students whose ways of knowing, communicating, or existing fall outside these standards have often been marginalized, misunderstood, or deemed deficient. Understanding how this standard of normalcy was constructed and sustained requires examining the intertwined systems of racism and ableism that determine which students are recognized as capable learners, whose behaviors are interpreted as "appropriate," whose language and vernacular are considered legitimate, and whose intelligence is validated through assessments shaped by the legacy of the eugenics movement (Anderson, 1988; Mayes, 2023).

This colonial model of schooling extends far beyond the United States. Across the Western Hemisphere and the Global South, European colonial powers imposed racial, linguistic, intellectual, and bodily hierarchies on African and Indigenous peoples through systems of education designed to regulate who could be seen as intelligent, disciplined, and worthy (Handy, 2024). These colonial histories continue to shape the educational experiences of Black neurodivergent students across contexts that may outwardly promote inclusion or affirmation. Such tensions can also emerge in institutions created to support Black students, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's), where strong traditions of racial affirmation may coexist with institutional norms that do not always fully recognize or support Black neurodivergent experiences.

HBCUs provide a culturally affirming space grounded in Black pride, resilience, and academic excellence (Bonner et al., 2024). However, this affirming environment often assumes neurotypical norms, unintentionally sidelining neurodivergent (ND) students whose communication styles, learning needs, or behaviors may not align with dominant expectations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how a peer support program, Peer Allies for Learning and Support (PALS), supported Black neurodivergent students at a historically Black university. Drawing on the experiences of student participants, the study explores how peer-led, disability-affirming spaces can strengthen belonging, reduce stigma, and support the academic persistence of Black neurodivergent students navigating predominantly neurotypical educational systems. More broadly, the study investigates how HBCUs can expand traditions of racial affirmation to more intentionally include disability justice and intersectional support for students at the nexus of race and neurodivergence.

The PALS program was created to address this gap. Over a 9-month period, PALS trained upperclassmen to mentor students in their first and second year of college, helping them navigate the challenges of neurotypical academic spaces while fostering self-advocacy, emotional support, and academic success. The program was designed to reduce stigma, strengthen retention, and support graduation outcomes for Black neurodivergent students within an HBCU context. Drawing on interviews with seven PALS participants, this study examines how students experienced the program and the extent to which its goals were realized. In doing so, it offers evidence of the critical role that community, peer support, and advocacy play in transforming schooling experiences for multiply marginalized students.

Significance

This study is significant because it addresses a critical gap in research and practice concerning the experiences of Black neurodivergent students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. While HBCUs are widely recognized as culturally affirming spaces that support Black student success, far less attention has been given to how neurodivergent students experience these environments at the intersection of race and disability. By centering the voices and lived experiences of Black neurodivergent students, this study expands conversations about equity, inclusion, and belonging beyond race-only frameworks toward more intersectional approaches that include disability justice.

The study is also significant because it highlights the potential of peer-led, culturally grounded support programs such as PALS to foster belonging, self-advocacy, emotional well-being, and academic persistence. In doing so, it demonstrates how *nested safe spaces* within HBCUs can help students navigate institutional barriers while affirming both Black and neurodivergent identities. The findings contribute to emerging scholarship on intersectionality, Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), and higher education by offering practical and theoretical insights into how institutions can move beyond accommodation alone toward more holistic and affirming models of support for multiply marginalized students.

For Black disabled and neurodivergent students, who have often been excluded, overlooked, or required to navigate institutions not designed with them in mind, programs like PALS offer more than support. They create possibilities for visibility, belonging, and collective liberation on college campuses. This study positions PALS as one example of how students and communities preserve, reclaim, and create spaces of liberation within educational institutions that have historically marginalized them.

Literature Review

This review traces the historical development of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and situates them within broader conversations about racial affirmation, educational access, and institutional inequality. It begins by outlining the origins and evolution of HBCUs as both sites of resistance to educational exclusion

and as institutions shaped by shifting political, economic, and social forces in the United States. It then reviews existing literature on HBCUs as spaces of racial safety and support, while also engaging scholarship that complicates this narrative by highlighting how intersecting identities, particularly disability, shape uneven experiences of belonging and inclusion.

The Herstory of HBCUs in the U.S. Context

HBCUs originated before the Civil War as responses to the exclusion of Black Americans from formal education, reflecting both abolitionist efforts and the restricted educational conditions under slavery (Anderson, 1988). After emancipation in 1865, the demand for education among formerly enslaved people led to rapid expansion through the Freedmen's Bureau and northern missionary societies, which established many early HBCUs as teacher-training and vocational institutions. This period also produced enduring philosophical debates between industrial education models associated with Booker T. Washington and liberal arts-centered visions advanced by W. E. B. DuBois that existed alongside racial consciousness with political formation (Brown, 2011). During the Jim Crow era (1877-1965), HBCUs educated over 90% of Black college students and became central hubs of leadership development and civil rights organizing, including activism (Mutakkabir, 2013). Following Brown v. Board of Education (1965), desegregation created a paradox in which expanded access to predominantly white institutions led to enrollment declines and financial strain at HBCUs (Harper, 2019).

Since formal desegregation with Brown v. Board of Education (1965), many HBCUs have faced reductions in federal aid purchasing power and state per-pupil funding, intensifying longstanding financial pressures (Bracey, 2017). Despite these challenges, HBCUs continue to play an outsized role in Black higher education and professional advancement. Although they represent only about 3% of U.S. postsecondary institutions, they enroll roughly 16% of African American undergraduates and produce disproportionately high numbers of Black graduates, including approximately 23% of Black bachelor's degree recipients and many of the nation's Black doctoral degree earners, teachers, dentists, and graduate school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

HBCU's as Spaces of Racial Affirmation and Safety

Literature presents HBCUs as important spaces of racial affirmation and refuge for Black students (Bonner et al., 2024), while also revealing important limitations in how safety and inclusion are experienced across intersecting identities. Mobley (2017) characterizes HBCUs as “places of Black refuge” rooted in traditions of racial uplift and protection (p. 1037), while Cubbage (2018) found that faculty members at an HBCU reported intentionally adapting classroom practices to help students feel comfortable and supported. Similarly, Darrell et al. (2016) describe HBCUs as “safe and nurturing” educational environments for Black students (p. 43). Williams et al.

(2018) extend this with counter-narratives from HBCU presidents, pushing back against deficit-focused institutional discourse and foregrounding HBCUs' unique role in transforming students marginalized in prior academic environments.

Complicating the Narrative: Limits of Universal Safety

However, other scholars complicate this narrative by demonstrating that these spaces do not always offer the same sense of safety and inclusion to all Black students. This reflects what Crenshaw (1989) describes as *single-axis thinking*, in which institutions center race while overlooking how intersecting identities, such as disability, shape students' experiences differently. Giddings (2018) writes that HBCU students simultaneously deploy the dominant white racial frame and anti-racist counter-frames, suggesting that even a predominantly Black institutional space doesn't automatically filter out the ideological residue of white supremacy. Likewise, Njoku et al. (2017) argue that respectability politics and heteronormative campus cultures at some HBCUs can create exclusionary conditions for students on the margins, undermining broader institutional commitments to inclusion. Patton et al. (2023) found that Black LGBTQ students at three urban HBCUs experienced campuses that affirmed their racial identities while simultaneously marginalizing their sexual and gender identities, producing what participants described as “safe space needed” alongside “wasted institutional efforts” (p. 1355).

Disability, Ableism, and Institutional Gaps at HBCUs

Research on disability at HBCUs further suggests that institutional refuge is unevenly experienced across disability identities as well. Banks and Hughes (2013) found that African American male students with disabilities frequently encountered lowered expectations and stigmatizing labels, although attendance at HBCUs helped some students construct empowering counter-identities. Similarly Davis et al. (2018), in a case study of a Black male pre-service teacher with an undisclosed disability, identified challenges related to field placement experiences and inconsistent academic performance. Ramirez-Stapleton et al. (2025) further explored the intersecting experiences of Black, Deaf, and disabled students through a Disability Justice framework, emphasizing both systemic barriers and opportunities for institutional transformation.

At the structural level, Taylor (2019) found that 94 out of 100 HBCU websites examined failed to meet ADA accessibility standards, suggesting persistent accessibility concerns beyond the classroom.

Intersectionality and the Limits of Race-Centered Campus

Across scholarship, a trend emerges: while HBCUs often serve as culturally affirming spaces for Black students broadly, their ability to function as fully inclusive safe spaces for students who exist outside of norms remains inconsistent; disability is frequently under-integrated into institutional equity efforts.

At HBCUs, where affirming Black identity is central (Bonner et al., 2024), neurodivergent students often remain invisible due to assumptions of a shared, neurotypical Black experience (Specks, 2025). Again, this reflects *single-axis thinking* (Crenshaw, 1989), focusing solely on race while ignoring intersecting identities like disability.

Because disability is often framed as a white, middle-class issue (Blanchett, 2010), many Black neurodivergent students face delayed diagnoses and limited support (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). Ngo and Sundell (2023), show that Black community college students with low-incidence disabilities are less likely to complete coursework, arguing that these outcomes are produced through the interaction of institutional racism and ableism rather than either system alone. Their findings provide quantitative evidence of structural inequities at the intersection of race and disability. In related work, Wilke and Berry (2025) argue that higher education accommodation systems are not race-neutral and often privilege white students while disadvantaging students of color with disabilities, partly due to assumptions about the apparentness of disability. Shallish (2020) further illustrates these dynamics, showing how Black disabled students navigate overlapping systems of anti-Black racism and ableism. Finally, Taylor et al. (2023) demonstrate that for Black youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, self-determination is key to improved transition outcomes, yet institutional supports are often shaped by "*interest convergence*," emerging primarily when they align with dominant institutional priorities rather than the needs of Black disabled youth.

Across this body of literature, a clear implication emerges for HBCUs: even within racially affirming environments, there is a tendency for institutional systems to prioritize race-centered inclusion while under-addressing disability, resulting in the separation of racial equity and disability support rather than their integration. As a result, even strong traditions of racial uplift and community engagement may not yet fully extend to neurodivergent or disabled students. This gap underscores the need for frameworks and programs that explicitly integrate race and disability, moving beyond race-centered inclusion alone toward fully intersectional approaches that reflect how students actually experience identity, support, and exclusion in HBCU contexts.

The Impact of Peer-Led Mentorship on Student Success and Belonging in HBCUs

Research on peer-led mentoring at HBCUs consistently suggests positive effects on academic success, belonging, self-efficacy, and persistence (Kendricks et al., 2013). Programs such as the Benjamin Banneker Scholars Program demonstrated that students viewed mentoring as the most influential component of their academic achievement, while broader studies of Black collegians found that peer mentoring significantly improved belonging, college adjustment, and persistence intentions while reducing imposter syndrome (Graham & McClain, 2019). Studies in STEM, nursing, and developmental education similarly report gains in academic self-efficacy, STEM identity, retention, and exam performance, often emphasizing how peer support reinforces racial identity, community cohesion, and resilience against

structural inequities (Conway, 2025; Igbo & Sule, 2022; Jones & Wendt, 2025). Related research on peer-led team learning further suggests that collaborative peer environments can reduce achievement gaps tied to unequal academic preparation and improve STEM retention (Salomone & Kling, 2010). Likewise, insights by Palmer et al., (2010) found that Black male graduates at an HBCU repeatedly identified peer support, alongside faculty relationships and the institution's racial climate, as central to their persistence and success.

HBCUs occupy a structural counterspace position relative to PWIs *and* simultaneously contain internal hierarchies that can reproduce the exclusions they were built to resist. The tension isn't a failure of the HBCU model, it's a feature of any institution that is itself embedded in racial capitalism, respectability politics, and heteronormativity while trying to build something against them (Dunn-Gallier, 2025; Njoku et al., 2017; Mobley, 2017).

Creating Nesting Safe Spaces: The Inceptions of PALS

Like all publicly funded colleges and universities, HBCUs must provide students their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and provide reasonable accommodations and access to facilities and classrooms for disabled students. Thus all federally funded HBCUs must have a center of campus that provides disability support services; however, there remains a need for expanded and enhanced support specifically tailored for students with language based disabilities as students may struggle to identify accommodations which are appropriate for their specific needs, understand how to access them, or feel comfortable disclosing their learning differences in the first place.

A pivotal moment that helped shape the development of PALS came from the experience of a student who ultimately dropped out after struggling to identify and connect with appropriate support. Despite needing assistance, the student encountered barriers in recognizing available services and navigating the system effectively, which contributed to feelings of isolation and academic difficulty. This experience highlighted a gap between formal institutional support and students' lived experiences of accessing them. In response, the creation of PALS emerged as a way to bridge that gap by providing peer-based, relatable guidance to help neurodivergent students better understand and utilize available resources before reaching a point of withdrawal or disengagement.

Rooted in disability justice principles (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018), PALS highlights the need for *nested safe spaces*, intentional, identity-affirming environments within broader communities. While HBCUs often function as safe havens for Black students, those who also identify as disabled frequently go unrecognized and unsupported (Banks & Gibson, 2020). PALS fills this void by creating a culturally grounded, disability-affirming peer network that promotes visibility and belonging. In doing so, it challenges ableism within Black spaces and advances a broader vision of equity, where students can thrive at the intersection of Blackness and neurodivergence.

PALS Set-Up

PALS faculty and an external partner collaborated to mentor selected upperclassmen to mentor underclassmen, helping them navigate the challenges of neurotypical academic spaces while fostering self-advocacy, emotional support, and academic success. Mentors were selected based on: 1) being a junior or senior; 2) considering themselves "successful", which was self defined; 3) possessed a formal diagnosis that was processed through the Office of Disability Services; and 4) time to dedicate at least 4 hours monthly to programming and mentoring. PALS aimed to reduce stigma, strengthen students' sense of belonging, improve retention, and support graduation outcomes for Black neurodivergent students. Although the program was overseen by faculty, selected upperclassmen mentors were responsible for creating and implementing the program. PALS was developed as a peer support program for neurodivergent students and operated over an academic school year. Through PALS, 10 neurodivergent upperclassmen created programming and a mentorship agenda that involved monthly programming and weekly mentoring of 20 neurodivergent underclassmen, creating a structured peer-mentoring system within the community. The program also employed a graduate assistant, a student who was also dyslexic, who oversaw the undergraduate mentors. The program aimed to reduce stigma, increase a sense of belonging, promoting self-advocacy and fostering a disability-affirming peer community. In addition, PALS sought to improve student retention and support graduation outcomes.

Methods

This study is grounded in the methodological and theoretical paradigms of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 2015) and Disability Critical Race Theory, or DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013). Together, these frameworks offer a critical lens for examining how racism and ableism intersect to shape the schooling experiences of Black neurodivergent students at the nexus of race and disability.

Theoretical Framework

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of "intersectionality," building on critical race theory and Black feminist legal scholarship. She argued that discrimination operates across multiple, overlapping dimensions rather than along a single axis. Individuals who hold several marginalized identities experience oppression in ways that are compounded and interconnected, not simply additive. Using the metaphor of a traffic intersection, she explained that when harm occurs at the crossing of multiple roads, it cannot be understood by examining only one direction of traffic. Crenshaw later identified three forms of intersectionality. Structural intersectionality examines how systems such as race, gender, and class position individuals differently within social and economic structures. Political intersectionality focuses on how institutions and social movements often prioritize a single identity category, neglecting those who exist at overlapping margins. Representational intersectionality addresses how media, cultural imagery, and public

narratives reinforce or resist these inequalities. These distinctions are especially important in higher education research because many institutional policies operate within the political dimension of intersectionality. Intersectionality requires examining the *conjunction*, not the additive sum (Haynes et al., 2020) and qualitative methods allow researchers to capture the lived texture of being at the intersection.

The other theory used to design and frame this study included Disability Critical Race Theory (Annamma et al., 2013; 2016; Ferri et al, 2024). DisCrit is especially useful for this study because its seven tenets emphasize multidimensional identities, the social construction of race and disability, the centering of marginalized voices, and the need to challenge institutional inequities. By grounding the study in DisCrit, this research seeks to expose systemic barriers within higher education and generate actionable insights that can push HBCUs beyond racial affirmation alone toward more fully inclusive spaces that recognize and support the complex, intersecting identities of all students.

The need for nested-spaces at HBCUs can be understood as fundamentally intersectional. Historically Black Colleges and Universities were established to confront racial exclusion and marginalization (Mobley, 2017), so their institutional frameworks and political priorities naturally center Black identity. However, within that broader focus on Blackness, additional dimensions such as gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and disability create layered identities and experiences that many institutional structures were not originally built to accommodate and may sometimes resist. As a result, individuals situated at multiple intersections may find their experiences insufficiently acknowledged or supported within spaces originally intended to provide inclusion and protection.

Analysis Methods

Using narrative inquiry, this study draws on semi-structured, open-ended interviews with seven Black neurodivergent students who participated in the PALS program during the 2024–2025 academic year. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that explores how people make meaning of their lived experiences through the stories they tell. It attends to the ways identity, context, and time shape these narratives, making it especially appropriate for understanding the layered experiences of Black neurodivergent students in educational settings.

The research team also intentionally worked to challenge traditional research hierarchies of privilege and power between students, professors, and community members. To do this, the study included community partners who were not professors and engaged participants through a reciprocal feedback process aligned with Freirean praxis. This approach emphasizes reflection, dialogue, action, and shared knowledge production (Campos & Anderson, 2021). As a result, the study was designed to produce findings that are culturally grounded, neurodiversity-affirming, and action-oriented.

Narrative inquiry has been used widely to examine both the systemic barriers and resilience strategies that shape Black students' educational experiences. Prior empirical studies show that Black students in higher education often encounter significant structural and social barriers to persistence while also developing resilience through supportive relationships, role models, family support, mentorship, and internal motivation. For example, Rotich (2024) identified barriers such as limited financial support, lack of cultural competence, and academic underpreparedness among African American male students, while also highlighting persistence factors such as family support, mentors, and personal drive. Hotchkins (2017) and Spencer and Ford (2025) found that Black students frequently experience racial battle fatigue while simultaneously developing leadership and coping strategies. Banks et al. (2025) demonstrated how Black deaf students persist through intersecting experiences of audism and racism, often supported by faculty and peer relationships. Gasman et al. (2004) documented how implicit assumptions about race and status shape the experiences of African American doctoral students, while Sarcedo (2022) emphasized the critical role of faculty support in the success of first-generation, low-income students of color.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate the value of narrative inquiry for capturing the complexity of Black students' educational experiences. This methodological approach allows the present study to examine not only the barriers Black neurodivergent students encounter, but also the forms of advocacy, community, resilience, and meaning-making that emerge through their participation in Bear PALS.

Participants

Location

HBCUs foster a culturally affirming environment rooted in Black pride and achievement. The HBCU that piloted the PALs program is much like many of the first 250 public HBCUs founded in the U.S. and have served as a pillar in the predominant urban community since its founding in the 1800s. While this university has worked to provide a range of support services for students with disabilities, a community advocate affiliated with the university collaborated with faculty to establish PALS in response to the ongoing need for expanded and enhanced disability support.

Participants

Using purposeful sampling, 30 undergraduate mentors and mentees of PALS were invited to participate in one-hour semi-structured virtual interviews. To support cognitive processing and reduce anxiety, questions were shared in advance. Of the 30 mentors, seven (7) volunteered to be interviewed for this study. All student participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Seven interviews

were conducted, transcribed using Zoom transcription and Otter.ai, and analyzed. This study was approved through the institutional review board of the faculty's institution.

Positioning the Research Team

Researcher positionality was an important part of this study. Five members of the research team are Black women with advanced degrees, and four identify as neurodivergent and are parents of neurodivergent children. All members of the team attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities as undergraduates, which helped create shared cultural understanding and relatability throughout the research process. The neurodivergent researchers conducted the interviews and worked directly with participants to help build trust and connection. Another team member identifies as a neurotypical Black woman whose background in mental and behavioral health and development supported the study design and interview analysis. Together, these shared identities and experiences helped ground the study in cultural understanding and affirm neurodivergent ways of knowing.

Findings: Student Experiences and Emergent Themes

The findings from this study illuminate how Black neurodivergent students navigate higher education through intersecting experiences of race, disability, belonging, and relational support. Across interviews, participants described both the challenges of existing within institutional spaces that often marginalize difference and the transformative potential of affirming community-centered environments. Their narratives reveal that support cannot be understood solely through academic accommodations or traditional student services; rather, students emphasized the importance of spaces where they could be fully recognized as whole people whose identities are layered, relational, and deeply interconnected. These findings demonstrate how race and neurodivergence shape students' experiences simultaneously, producing unique forms of visibility, exclusion, resilience, and community-building within campus life.

Two interconnected themes emerged prominently throughout the data. First, students described the importance of intersectional identity affirmation, emphasizing the need for environments where both their Blackness and neurodivergence were acknowledged, validated, and supported rather than fragmented or misunderstood. Participants consistently reflected on the emotional and social impact of moving from spaces of isolation, labeling, and deficit-based assumptions toward spaces where they felt fully seen. Second, students highlighted peer mentorship and relational community care as critical forms of emotional anchoring that supported not only their academic persistence but also their emotional well-being, identity development, and sense of belonging.

Theme 1: Intersectional Identity Affirmation

Black neurodivergent students in the PALS program consistently emphasized the importance of being in spaces where both their racial and neurodivergent identities are recognized, affirmed, and supported. Across interviews, students described how their intersectional identities are often overlooked or fragmented in traditional academic settings, making affirming peer spaces especially important for their sense of belonging and self-understanding. As Imani shared, "being Black and neurodivergent, it has shaped me deeply in waves," highlighting how identity is experienced as layered, dynamic, and ongoing rather than fixed or singular.

Students described programs like PALS as critical sites of affirmation and connection. Vilissa explained, "I feel like that's what PALS excels in…I feel like [PALS] is very strong in keeping us all together… knowing that we are understanding that we are neurodivergent." Rather than functioning solely as a support program, PALS became a space of mutual recognition where students did not have to translate or justify their experiences. These affirming peer relationships disrupted institutional patterns that often render Black neurodivergent students invisible or peripheral. As students noted, when educational environments acknowledge the complexity of intersecting identities, they begin to dismantle exclusionary structures and create conditions for belonging.

Importantly, this sense of affirmation also translated into action. Students described moving from participation to advocacy, using what they learned in PALS to build disability awareness events and serve as informal peer mentors and "cultural brokers" for other students navigating invisible or undiagnosed disabilities. One student, Anita, shared how a peer's late ADHD diagnosis and openness about neurodivergence helped her reflect on her own identity: "It kind of makes the weight off…like, it's not just me, it's everybody." Here, shared storytelling becomes a form of emotional relief and collective validation, reducing stigma through relational connection. These experiences underscore how peer mentoring spaces not only provide information, but also redistribute emotional labor and normalize neurodivergent identity through community.

At the same time, students also described the emotional weight of initially understanding their intersectional identities. One student reflected, "being Black and a person that's neurodivergent, I thought it was like, it was the end of the world for me… the first thing they look at is skin color…, being neurodivergent adds on to that." This reflection illustrates how disability is not experienced in isolation but is shaped through racialized social contexts that already center whiteness as the assumed norm. Neurodivergence becomes another layer of difference imposed onto an already racialized body, producing compounded visibility and marginalization. Rather than being additive in a simple sense, these identities interact to intensify experiences of being marked as "other" within institutional spaces.

Students also highlighted how social environments contribute to this sense of marginalization. One participant described how neurodivergent students are often socially categorized within peer cultures, explaining, "people that are

neurodivergent… they're left out of the loop. They're usually in that click of oh, they're special, or they're this, or they're that" This framing shows how difference is often shaped through labeling that influences who is seen as belonging. These exclusions are not just about disability, but are also shaped by broader social hierarchies that affect visibility, inclusion, and peer belonging on campus.

This experience of being labeled rather than fully seen also extended into academic spaces. One student explained, "I felt like I wasn't being treated like a regular student, even though I am… not having someone the first thing they look at is me being… having a learning disability, or me having ADHD, or me having anxiety… but me being a whole person." This shows how institutional approaches to disability can sometimes reduce students to diagnostic labels, overshadowing who they are as whole people. In contrast, students shared that more affirming environments allow them to be seen in their full complexity, rather than being defined only by their disability.

Similarly, students described feeling deprioritized in instructional settings, particularly when faculty attempt to accommodate "the majority" of students. As one participant explained, "I feel like I'm part of the last people to get support." This reflects how ableist institutional structures often treat accommodations as secondary rather than foundational to teaching and learning. Intersectionally, this marginalization is compounded for students whose racial and disability identities already position them outside normative assumptions of the "typical" student.

Despite these challenges, students also described more affirming relational contexts, particularly in student-led spaces. One participant shared that when she disclosed her ADHD and anxiety, peers did not reduce her to those identities: "they don't make that my whole person… they treat me as an individual." Student leaders, in particular, were described as "very understanding," engaging peers without allowing disability to define them. These accounts suggest that peer-based environments can interrupt ableist tendencies toward labeling, offering instead more holistic and relational forms of recognition.

Students also reflected on earlier educational experiences that shaped their current understandings of belonging. One participant recalled being separated from peers in high school due to ADHD and learning disability labels, explaining, "I was separated from all the 'normal students'…" In contrast, college was described as a major shift, where identity was less immediately tied to deficit-based labels. These experiences show how educational systems can either reinforce or interrupt patterns of exclusion depending on how disability is understood and applied in practice.

Finally, students articulated how multiple marginalized identities compound experiences of exclusion. One participant explained, "You could be Black, neurodivergent and gay… you have three targets put on your back… because you're not identified as the normal person in society." This reflects how racism, ableism, and heteronormativity operate together to construct normative identity and position

certain bodies as perpetually outside it. Rather than functioning independently, these systems interact to produce layered vulnerability within academic and social environments.

Across narratives, students emphasized both the harms of being reduced to labels and the transformative potential of spaces that affirm their full humanity. Programs like PALS emerge as critical sites where intersectional identities are not only acknowledged but actively validated, allowing students to move from isolation toward connection, from labeling toward recognition, and from marginalization toward collective affirmation.

Theme 2: Peer Mentorship as Emotional Anchoring

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of peer mentorship for emotional grounding, confidence-building, and academic success. These mentoring relationships provided students with a foundation of trust, mutual understanding, and belonging as they navigated the complexities of their intersecting identities as Black and neurodivergent individuals in higher education. Across interviews, students described experiences rooted in collectivism, relational care, and shared understanding rather than individual achievement alone. When intentionally brought together through the program, participants appeared to organically engage in liberatory ways of being and knowing that align closely with principles of decolonial psychology. As Bhatia et al. (2025) argued, a cornerstone of decolonial perspectives involves moving beyond individualism toward "futures that are grounded in community, pluriversality, and relational agency" (p. 1102). Students' narratives reflected exactly this kind of relational agency, where healing, affirmation, and growth emerged through community connection and shared experience.

For many participants, the opportunity to be in community with other Black neurodivergent students created spaces that felt emotionally safe, validating, and deeply affirming. Anita explained her desire for a space where students could openly discuss identities that are often misunderstood or silenced, stating, "I am a Black woman who's neurodivergent…but I just never met other Black students who also are neurodivergent in one space… I just want to provide that space for those to talk about it." Her reflections position PALS as more than a mentoring initiative; it functioned as a counterspace where students could resist isolation and reclaim visibility. These spaces challenged dominant institutional norms rooted in whiteness, ableism, and normative expectations of communication and behavior by centering the lived realities of Black neurodivergent students. The significance of these spaces lies not only in emotional support but also in their disruption of systems that frequently marginalize students whose identities exist at the intersection of race and disability.

Other students emphasized how peer relationships fostered both emotional support and academic motivation. Claudia described the importance of surrounding herself with peers who shared similar goals and aspirations, explaining that "being able to surround yourself around friends that…want to flourish…that are focused on the

same things…is important." For Claudia, community created the conditions necessary to thrive rather than merely survive. Her reflections suggest that peer mentorship operated as a form of collective accountability and encouragement, helping students envision possibilities for themselves that extended beyond persistence alone. These relationships became spaces where students could develop confidence, reinforce academic goals, and feel supported in their personal growth.

Malcolm similarly described peer relationships as grounding spaces that helped him navigate difficult emotional moments while remaining connected to campus life. Reflecting on one relationship with another neurodivergent student, he shared, "There's definitely been times where I've had terrible days… I just take a walk on campus and I see another neurodivergent student that I have grown pretty close with". He went on to describe how this student organized informal dance gatherings that brought students together in moments of joy and emotional release, noting that "sometimes a little dance can brighten up someone's day." Malcolm's account highlights how students cultivated alternative forms of care and healing outside of formal institutional structures. Rather than relying solely on counseling services or individualized interventions, students created community-based emotional practices rooted in creativity, movement, joy, and collective participation. These practices challenge institutional assumptions that support must always be clinical or formally structured. Malcolm's experiences of connection and isolation were shaped simultaneously by race and neurodivergence. Peer connection became a mechanism for resisting invisibility and affirming humanity within spaces where he often felt different from those around him.

Ashley also emphasized the emotional significance of finding community through student organizations and supportive relationships. Speaking about her involvement in the PALS, she explained that the organization "made me feel like home" and provided a space where she could "still be more of myself" while navigating school and personal growth. Ashley connected this sense of openness to her transition from a predominantly white educational background into an HBCU environment, where she no longer felt pressured to remain "in the background" or silence herself. Her reflections illustrate how racial identity and neurodivergence shape experiences of visibility and voice differently across educational contexts. While the HBCU environment offered racial affirmation, Ashley's narrative also suggests the continued importance of intentional neurodivergent support and relational care. Her sense of emotional grounding came not just from formal programs, but from relationships that affirmed her presence, supported her self-expression, and helped her feel seen as she grew into her identity.

These narratives demonstrate that peer mentorship and community care functioned as critical emotional anchors for Black neurodivergent students. Whether through informal peer relationships, creative communal practices, student organizations, or affirming mentorship, participants consistently identified emotional connection as essential to thriving in college rather than simply enduring it. These support systems

operated as counterspaces that resisted institutional structures marginalizing racial and neurodivergent differences while fostering belonging, agency, and self-expression.

Discussion

This study foregrounds the intersectional identity affirmation of Black neurodivergent students at HBCUs, revealing the critical need for spaces where overlapping identities, race and disability, amongst other constructs, are simultaneously recognized and valued.

The findings challenge the common *single-axis thinking* within HBCU communities that often centers Blackness but assumes neurotypicality, rendering neurodivergent students invisible within their own racial communities. This invisibility is compounded by ableist assumptions. As a result, affirming Black identity at HBCUs must expand to a more nuanced embrace that includes disability justice, ensuring that advocacy and resources are tailored to the complex realities of students living at multiple marginalized intersections. The formation of peer-led groups like PALS exemplifies how *nested safe spaces* within the broader Black affirming environment can offer identity-affirming community and care that counters exclusionary dynamics and supports full student embodiment.

Findings evidence how ableism is an interconnected system that institutionalizes the marginalization of Black neurodivergent students. An emphasis on structural and historical inequities rooted in colonial ideology deepens understanding of how such experiences of faculty resistance to provide adequate accommodations and felt stigmatization reflect broader systemic barriers rather than isolated incidents for Black ND college students. The call for multilayered advocacy within disability services at HBCUs aligns with the focus on rejecting neutral interpretations of rights and centering marginalized voices to enact institutional change.

HBCUs can play a vital role in affirming the complex identities of Black neurodivergent students by fostering culturally grounded support spaces like PALS. These communities offer emotional safety, validation, and connection, helping students feel less isolated while navigating both racial and neurodivergent experiences. To sustain this impact, HBCUs could formally fund and recognize peer-led disability groups and embed intersectional identity affirmation into campus culture through ongoing training and events.

PALS is significant because it addresses a critical gap in support for Black neurodivergent students at HBCU. While HBCUs provide culturally affirming environments grounded in Black identity, these spaces often still assume neurotypical norms that can unintentionally marginalize neurodivergent students in their communication styles, learning needs, and self-advocacy practices. The program trained neurodivergent upperclassmen to mentor underclassmen over a nine-month period, offering academic guidance, emotional support, and strategies for navigating neurotypical academic spaces while also reducing stigma, increasing belonging,

improving retention, and supporting graduation. Framed by intersectionality and Disability Critical Race Theory, PALS functions as a *nested safe space* that advances a more inclusive model of student support by affirming both Black and neurodivergent identities within HBCU contexts and is evidence that we find *love in the details* of systems change.

Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of creating educational spaces that affirm Black neurodivergent students' intersecting identities. While HBCUs have historically served as spaces of racial affirmation and belonging, this study demonstrates the need to expand these commitments to intentionally include disability justice and neurodivergent experiences.

Findings from the PALS program illustrate how peer mentorship and culturally grounded support can foster belonging, self-advocacy, emotional well-being, and academic persistence. As a *nested safe space*, PALS provided students with opportunities to be recognized beyond diagnostic labels and supported as whole individuals whose identities are shaped by both race and neurodivergence.

This study underscores the importance of moving beyond accommodation-based approaches toward more intersectional models of inclusion. By centering student voices, peer relationships, and disability-affirming practices, HBCUs can continue their traditions of empowerment while creating more equitable environments where Black neurodivergent students are fully seen, valued, and supported.

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Declarations

Author contributions

Simone Gibson: Concept. – Cur. datos – An. formal – Obt. financ. – Investig. – Metod. – Adm. proyecto – Recursos – Red. borr. orig. – Rev. y ed. – Approval of the final manuscript submitted to the journal.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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All data supporting the results of this study are published in the article itself.

Ethical implications

The author(s) declare(s) that this article has no ethical implications regarding its development, writing, or publication.

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