A National Focus: An Assessment of the Habits of African American Males From Urban Households of Poverty Who Successfully Complete Secondary Education Programs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to assess six habits of academic achievement by African American male students from households of poverty whom been successful in completing a 5-A high school program of study. Despite the wealth of research that indicates a great disparity among racial and gender groups with regard to standardized assessment, participation in advanced placement courses, and the overrepresentation of minorities in special education, particularly the African American male, in the realm academic achievement; there are still those male students who utilize individual achievement models to divert the apparent legacy of failure or lack of productivity. This will be referred to as the "success phenomenon."

Cooper and Jordan (2003) argue that "good schools encourage at-risk students to surpass the level of education of their parents to obtain social progress (transformative) while allowing affluent students to, at least, reach the same level

as their parents (reproductive)." Despite the literature that delineates a precedent of failure, some African American males who share common demographic influences in poverty, succeed in competing the high school curriculum, advance in the mind field of high stakes testing, placement in special education programs. Somehow achievement finds a way. What unique characteristics do these males possess that help them to be and remain academically successful while juggling the effects of poverty?

The purpose of this article is to discover what habits these young men possess that enable them to be successful and basically beat the odds. Two issues should be addressed when discussing educational achievement for poor Black youth. The first is that any differences within this particular subgroup should be placed in the context of the differences that exist in larger society. Another issue, which should be addressed, is exactly how educational achievement is measured (Wheat 1997). Teaching and nurturing Black males through their own self-imposed obstacles and behaviors can be a marathon (Wynn 2005). Where do educators, theorists, or researchers begin to find and implement leadership strategies that are constructively aimed at an imperceptible moving target? A target that is complex and mutable, multifaceted; intangible; and, easily adaptable to its changing environment. Where should theorists look intently? They must look first inside the culture that produces and influences the African American male: its own.

Educators must begin to look for and acknowledge the African American male's culture to discover what Payne (1985) refers to as "hidden rules" these young men bring to the learning forum as a result of poverty. The understanding of these rules and how they impact student learning should instigate more research in this area as it relates specifically to academic achievement of African American males.

Neither poverty nor culture is educational destiny. Very little research reveals the habits of African American males who have successfully completed high school in an environment of poverty. The process of connecting African American males to the world of academic achievement isn't easy in the best of educational settings—and such settings are today far and few behind. But that means that in order to "counter and transform" African American "cultural patterns," as Pedro Noguera calls for, fundamental change in American education will be necessary. Recognizing that there is a problem is the first step (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003).

Payne's (1985) concept of hidden rule seems to gain credence when it is considered that unless the larger society seeks to identify the hidden rules of the culture of these young men, the problem will persist.

Educators must begin to intently look into a cultural mirror that may not reflect positive and strong self-concepts, but must understand that it is there. The way that one perceives himself is vital to the learning process. The mirror image of the Black male has remained constant over the past three decades or so; despite research, intervention, discussion, theory or blame; things have remained virtually the same. However, some Black males have used this part of their legacy to determine influence.

Late 20th century America is the scene of stunning African American male success stories exemplified by superstar athletes and entertainers. The image of a larger-than-life Michael Jordan exists in stark contrast to the daily grind the millions of employed semi-employed and unemployed African American men endure. Dr. James Lanier, Senior Resident Scholar for community Justice Programs at the National Urban

League's Institute for Opportunity and Equality, posits Black males are only six percent of the U.S. populations, but 44 percent of the national prison population. On average Black men who are employed earn nearly $16,900 less per year than White men. And while the economic boom of the later 1990s boosted Black income and shrank unemployment to historic lows, amid the current slump Black joblessness has surged once again so that it is now double that of whites (Muhammad, Davis, Lui, Leondar-Wright 2004).

Theorists such as Erikson (1950) have suggested that major aspects of human development unfold in a series of life stages. As individuals progress through the life stages, they must achieve a series of developmental tasks. The achievement of these tasks at one stage of life influences success with tasks in succeeding states. When considering psychosocial development of young African American males, it is important to note the social, cultural and economic forces throughout American history that have combined to keep Black males from assuming traditional masculine roles (Staples 1982).

Innovative academic roads are forged. In order to progress, young African American males must be offered ways of thinking above and beyond their current dilemma and taught to refuse to accept definitions of them within a paradigm that seeks their self-destruction. Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer (2003) provide quantitative support for the effects of negative school climate asserted by Cooper and Jordan (2003) and seek to identify in their study whether African American males employ reactive coping strategies (bravado attitudes) in response to negative social and educational experiences (Coleman 2002).

The educational system's failure to connect with African American males is rarely addressed, though the impact is tremendous- from families and crime to employment and quality of life. Most Black males who graduate from high school move on to social and economic mediocrity or worse. Not only do African American males fall behind their male peers but are also unable to maintain professional, social, and economic footing with Black females. Still, there has been little attention paid to how to raise expectations and performance. Examples of success often are the result of strong, determined personalities, rather than systematic improvements.

Black males are largely perceived and stereotyped by one or more of the five D's: dumb, deprive, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed (Gibbs 1988).

William A. Sampson examines several questions in his book, Black Student Achievement: How Much do Family and School Really Matter? He looks at the problems that engaged researchers of urban minority students for decades: what factors create a successful student, what are the factors that most influence learner to success, what reforms are needed to assure student success? Sampson's theory is that 'differences in family dynamics and/or home environment account for the differences in school performance."

Ogbu (2003) who grew up in Nigeria discussed Low Effort Syndrome. He concluded that "there was a culture among Black students to reject behaviors perceived to be 'white' which included making good grades, speaking Standard English, being overly involved in class, and enrolling in honors or advanced-placement courses. The students told Ogbu that engaging in these behaviors suggested one was renouncing his Black identity. Ogbu concluded that the African American peer culture, by and large, put

pressure on students not to do well in school, as if it were an affront to blackness (Myke's Weblog 2003).

Academic success is sustained. The most difficult task facing educators and mentors of African American males is to expand the focus beyond intervention and prevention programs to conceptualizing and implementing empowerment processes. If we want change to matter, to spread, to last, then the system in which leaders do their work must make sustainability a priority (Hargreaves & Fink 2003). To help alleviate the disparage in African American male and other groups Wheat (1997) argues for the emergence of and subsequent controversy surrounding schools exclusively for Black boys…specifically, there is at least the perception by some that Black boys are falling behind Black girls in educational achievement" (p.1). Wheat further contends that a major issue that should be addressed when hypothesizing about factors that contribute to the achievement of the Black male is how is education achievement truly measured? He believes, "the difference in educational achievement can be measured in a number of ways, which can make it difficult to state conclusively whether one group has strictly better academic performance than the other (Wheat 1997).

For the past decades, terms such as school reform, restructuring, redesign, and improvement have dominated educational discourse regarding possible ways of affecting fundamental changes in schooling experience of at-risk students. Research suggests that these initiatives emerged in several waves (Lusi 1997). The early waves focused directly upon raising standards. Failing schools were often mandated to work harder at doing more of the same (p.4). On the one hand, there is recognition by the educational research community that many Black children and adolescents may need potent interventions to succeed in school

Teachers who expect that African American male student cannot achieve academically will model inappropriate behavior to support his erroneous assumption asserts Reglin (1994, p.3).

Self-determination is the glue that has kept all of the pieces together. One unusual anomaly that appears to exist in the academic success of the Black males is the theory of resilience (Reis, Colbert & Hebert 2005). This group of Black males overcomes the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that are emphasized in current research literature.

For instance, the resilience theory that attempts to explain academic achievement among students who encounter negative psychological and environmental situations where no single definition of resilience exits. Wolin and Wolin (1993) describe resilient individuals hardy, invulnerable and invincible. Rutter (1987) defines resilience as a "positive role of individual differences in people's response to stress and adversity" (p. 316). However, Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) define educational resilience as the "heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments, despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (p.46).

Most previous research on academic resilience has focused on at-risk minority students. Our results suggest that this focus has been well justified, in that the "double jeopardy" of being poor and a minority student exposes students to greater risks and few resilience-promoting conditions. Within the sample of African American students, from relatively homogeneous low socioeconomic status backgrounds, it is the disturbing fact

that the minority students from the sample have poorer levels of internal locus of control and academic self-efficacy and are exposed to school environments that are less conducive to academic resilience.

Before students think of college enrollment, there must be some form of aspiration to do so. Eighty-eight percent of 8th graders expect to participate in postsecondary education, and approximately seventy percent of high school graduates actually go to college within two years of graduation. Oftentimes, aspirations develop as a result of the desire to become removed from the present economic or social environment.

St. John (1991) on aspirations confirms that when socioeconomic factors are held constant, African American males often have higher aspirations for higher education than other ethnic/racial groups. In recent research, Gates Millennium Scholars, Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2003) found that "compared with other racial/ethnic groups, African American students were more like to have the highest education aspirations (p.9). For African Americans, this is undoubtedly tied to the cultural belief of education being the only means by which African Americans can increase their stature in society. Education for African Americans is a means to overcome and rise above economic deprivation (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh 2003).

"No significant learning occurs without significant relationship." (Comer 1987). Here is the genesis of a new school of thought. Significant relationships are a phenomenon that includes the input of parents, teachers, administrators, clergy, business partners, and community. These stakeholders will each play a vital role in the development of a novel and flexible action plan to combat the disenfranchised and underachieving perception of the Black male in order to cultivate and demonstrate a legacy of excellence.

It is palpable, however, the notion that family systems possess and exert influence on the Black male: whether that influence is considered positive or negative. If these men can be viewed as unsuccessful, one must look at the influence family systems exert on them with renewed scrutiny. Family is where one should receive the gift of empowering legacy; however, too often this element is not passed on from one generation to the next. Legacy enables one to see himself through the eyes of possibility and challenge. There has to be a revival in the Black community initially with families. Being victims of poverty is no longer a viable rationale to be excused from non-productivity. Family and community encourage and instill the idea of legacy into its own. Legacy that will not produce doubt in men "who themselves are not yet sure of their right to demand opportunities to forge new roads entitled success" (DuBois 1903).

Many children live in vulnerable families and neighborhoods where the incidence of poverty…is widespread. Schools are increasingly recognizing that the educational performance of at-risk children will not improve unless efforts are mad to remove the barriers to learning created by problems that begin outside of the classroom walls. The research on the effectiveness of parent involvement with older students, therefore, often focuses on different forms of participation—e.g. parents monitoring homework, helping students make postsecondary plans and select courses which support these plans, parent-school agreements on rewards for achievement and behavioral improvements—as well as some of the "stand-by" functions, such as regular home-school communication about

students' progress and parent attendance at school-sponsored activities. Clearly, parent involvement is effective in fostering achievement and affective gains at all levels, and schools are encouraged to engage and maintain this involvement throughout the secondary years (Cotton & Wikelund 1989).

In conclusion, a review of research in this analysis yields six specific habits (or themes) that appear to be instrumental in helping African American males from households of poverty be academically successful:

1) Hidden cultural rules that are utilized at various points by Black males to ensure success;
2) A strong sense of self and the innate desire to achieve;
3) Sustained motivation for achievement that is threaded throughout the secondary academic career;
4) A determination to succeed despite the influences of poverty;
5) A high degree of aspiration to envision success well beyond high school; and,
6) A strong system of significant relationships that exist in the family, community, and school.

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