The Gendered Society Reader

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The Trouble with Black Boys: The Role and Influence of Environmental and Cultural Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males

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All of the most important quality-of-life indicators suggest that African American males are in deep trouble. They lead the nation in homicides, both as victims and perpetrators (Skolnick & Currie, 1994), and in what observers regard as an alarming trend, they now have the fastest growing rate for suicide (National Research Council, 1989; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). For the past several years, Black males have been contracting HIV and AIDS at a faster rate than any other segment of the population (Auerbach, Krimgold, & Lefkowitz, 2000; Centers for Disease Control, 1988; Kaplan, Johnson, Bailey, & Simon, 1987), and their incarceration, conviction, and arrest rates have been at the top of the charts in most states for some time (Roper, 1991; Skolnick & Currie, 1994). Even as babies, Black males have the highest probability of dying in the first year of life (Auerbach et al., 2000; National Research Council, 1989), and as they grow older they face the unfortunate reality of being the only group in the United States experiencing a decline in life expectancy (Spivak,

Prothrow-Stith, & Hausman, 1988). In the labor market, they are the least likely to be hired and in many cities, the most likely to be unemployed (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Massey & Denton, 1993; Moss & Tilly, 1995; Wilson, 1987).

Beset with such an ominous array of social and economic hardships, it is hardly surprising that the experience of Black males in education, with respect to attainment and most indicators of academic performance, also shows signs of trouble and distress. In many school districts throughout the United States, Black males are more likely than any other group to be suspended and expelled from school (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). From 1973 to 1977 there was a steady increase in African American enrollment in college. However, since 1977 there has been a sharp and continuous decline, especially among males (Carnoy, 1994; National Research Council, 1989). Black males are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded or suffering from a learning disability, more likely to be placed in special education (Milofsky, 1974), and

more likely to be absent from advanced-placement and honors courses (Oakes, 1985; Pollard, 1993). In contrast to most other groups where males commonly perform at higher levels, such as in math- and science-related courses, the reverse is true for Black males (Pollard, 1993). Even class privilege and the material benefits that accompany it fail to inoculate Black males from low academic performance. When compared to their White peers, middle-class African American males lag significantly behind in both grade point average and on standardized tests (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

It is not surprising that there is a connection between the educational performance of African American males and the hardships they endure within the larger society (Coleman et al., 1966). In fact, it would be more surprising if Black males were doing well academically in spite of the broad array of difficulties that confront them. Scholars and researchers commonly understand that environmental and cultural factors have a profound influence on human behaviors, including academic performance (Brookover & Erickson, 1969; Morrow & Torres, 1995). What is less understood is how environmental and cultural forces influence the way in which Black males come to perceive schooling and how those perceptions influence their behavior and performance in school. There is considerable evidence that the ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds of students have bearing on how students are perceived and treated by the adults who work with them within schools (Brookover & Erickson, 1969; Morrow & Torres, 1995). However, we know less about the specific nature of the perceptions and expectations that are held toward Black males and how these may in turn affect their performance within schools. More to the point, there is considerable confusion regarding why being Black and male causes this segment of the population to stand out in the most negative and alarming ways, both in school and in the larger society.

This article is rooted in the notion that it is possible to educate all children, including Black males, at high levels. This idea is not an articulation of faith but rather a conclusion drawn from a vast body of research on human development and from research on the learning styles of Black children (Lee, 2000). Therefore, it is possible for schools to take actions that can reverse the patterns of low achievement among African American males. The fact that some schools and programs manage to do so already is further evidence that there exists a possibility of altering these trends (Edmonds, 1979). To the degree that we accept the idea that human beings have the capacity to resist submission to cultural patterns, demographic trends, environmental pressures and constraints, bringing greater clarity to the actions that can be taken by schools and community organizations to support the academic achievement of African American males could be the key to changing academic outcomes and altering the direction of negative trends for this segment of the population (Freire, 1972).

This article explores the possibility that the academic performance of African American males can be improved by devising strategies that counter the effects of harmful environmental and cultural forces. Drawing on research from a variety of disciplines, the article begins with an analysis of the factors that place certain individuals (i.e., African American males) at greater risk than others. This is followed by an analysis of the ways in which environmental and cultural forces interact and influence academic outcomes and how these factors shape the relationship between identity, particularly related to race and gender, and school performance. Finally, strategies for countering harmful environmental and cultural influences, both the diffuse and the direct, are explored with particular attention paid to recommendations for educators, parents, and youth service providers who seek to support young African American males.

The Nature of the "Risk"

The good news is that not all Black males are at risk. I was reminded of this fact on my way to work one morning. Before driving to San Francisco with a colleague, another Black male academic, we stopped to pick up a commuter so

that we could make the trip across the Bay Bridge in the faster carpool lane during the middle of the rush hour. As it turned out, the first carpooler to approach our car was another Black male. As we drove across the bridge, we made small talk, going from basketball to the merits of living in the Bay Area, until finally we approached the subject of our careers. The rider informed us that he managed a highly profitable telecommunications firm, and if his plans progressed as he hoped, he would be retiring on a very lucrative pension in Hawaii before the age of 50. Contemplating his financial good fortune and that of my colleague and myself (although the two of us had no plans for early retirement), I posed the question, "What explains why we are doing so well and so many brothers like us are not?"

The answer was not obvious. All three of us were raised in working-class families, had grown up in tough neighborhoods, had close friends and family members who had been killed while they were young, and knew others who were serving time in prison. What made our lives, with our promising careers and growing families, so fortunate and so different? All three of us were raised by both of our parents, but further exploration revealed that none of us had regular contact with our fathers. We all attended public schools, but each of us felt that we had succeeded in spite of, and not because of, the schools we attended. With time running out as we approached our rider's stop, we threw out the possibility that the only thing that spared us the fate of so many of our brethren was luck, not getting caught for past indiscretions and not being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Viewed in the context of the negative social patterns cited previously, the explanation for our apparent good luck does not seem mysterious. Although it is true that many Black males are confronted with a vast array of risks, obstacles, and social pressures, the majority manages to navigate these with some degree of success. The good news is that most Black males are not in prison, do not commit suicide, and have not contracted HIV/AIDS. These facts do not negate the significance of the problems that confront Black males, but they do help to keep the problems in perspective.

Understanding how and why many Black males avoid the pitfalls and hardships that beset others may help us to devise ways to protect and provide support for more of them.

The effects of growing up in poverty, particularly for children raised in socially isolated, economically depressed urban areas, warrants greater concern, especially given that one out of every three Black children is raised in a poor household (Carnoy, 1994). Here the evidence is clear that the risks faced by children, particularly African American males, in terms of health, welfare, and education, are substantially greater (Gibbs, 1988). A recent longitudinal study on the development of children whose mothers used drugs (particularly crack cocaine) during pregnancy found that when compared to children residing in similar neighborhoods from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, the children in the sample showed no greater evidence of long-term negative effects. This is not because the incidence of physical and cognitive problems among the sample was not high, but because it was equally high for the control group. The stunned researchers, who fully expected to observe noticeable differences between the two groups, were compelled to conclude that the harmful effects of living within an impoverished inner-city environment outweighed the damage inflicted by early exposure to drugs (Jackson, 1998).

A vast body of research on children in poverty shows that impoverished conditions greatly increase the multiplier effect on risk variables (i.e., single-parent household, low birth weight, low educational attainment of parents, etc.) (Gabarino, 1999). Poor children generally receive inferior services from schools and agencies that are located in the inner city, and poor children often have many unmet basic needs. This combination of risk factors means it is nearly impossible to establish cause and effect relationships among them. For example, research has shown that a disproportionate number of poor children suffer from a variety of sight disorders (Harry, Klingner, & Moore, 2000). However, the disabilities experienced by children are often related to poverty rather than a biological disorder. For example,

because poor children often lack access to preventive health care, their untreated vision problems are inaccurately diagnosed as reading problems, and as a consequence, large numbers are placed in remedial and special education programs (Harry et al., 2000). Throughout the country, Black children are overrepresented in special education programs. Those most likely to be placed in such programs are overwhelmingly Black, male, and poor (Harry et al., 2000).

The situation in special education mirrors a larger trend in education for African Americans generally and males in particular. Rather than serving as a source of hope and opportunity, some schools are sites where Black males are marginalized and stigmatized (Meier et al., 1989). In school, Black males are more likely to be labeled with behavior problems and as less intelligent even while they are still very young (Hilliard, 1991). Black males are also more likely to be punished with severity, even for minor offenses, for violating school rules (Sandler, Wilcox, & Everson, 1985, p. 16) and often without regard for their welfare. They are more likely to be excluded from rigorous classes and prevented from accessing educational opportunities that might otherwise support and encourage them (Oakes, 1985, p. 53). Consistently, schools that serve Black males fail to nurture, support, or protect them.

However, changing academic outcomes and countering the risks experienced by Black males is not simply a matter of developing programs to provide support or bringing an end to unfair educational policies and practices. Black males often adopt behaviors that make them complicit in their own failure. It is not just that they are more likely to be punished or placed in remedial classes, it is also that they are more likely to act out in the classroom and to avoid challenging themselves academically. Recognizing that Black males are not merely passive victims but may also be active agents in their own failure, means that interventions designed to help them must take this into account. Changing policies, creating new programs, and opening new opportunities will accomplish little if such efforts are not accompanied by strategies to actively engage Black males

and their families in taking responsibility to improve their circumstances. Institutionally, this may require programmatic interventions aimed at buffering and offsetting the various risks to which Black males are particularly vulnerable. However, to be effective such initiatives must also involve efforts to counter and transform cultural patterns and what Ogbu (1987) has called the "oppositional identities" adopted by Black males that undermine the importance they attach to education.

As I will illustrate, one of the best ways to learn how this can be done is to study those schools and programs that have proven successful in accomplishing this goal. Additionally, it is important for such work to be anchored in a theoretical understanding of how the pressures exerted on Black males in American society can be contested. Without such an intellectual underpinning, it is unlikely that new interventions and initiatives will succeed at countering the hazardous direction of trends for African American males.

Structural Versus Cultural Explanations

Epidemiologists and psychologists have identified a number of risk factors within the social environment that when combined, are thought to have a multiplier effect on risk behavior. Lack of access to health care, adequate nutrition, and decent housing, growing up poor and in a single-parent household, being exposed to substance abuse at a young age, and living in a crime-ridden neighborhood are some of the variables most commonly cited (Earls, 1991, p. 14). Similarly, anthropologists and sociologists have documented ways in which certain cultural influences can lower the aspirations of Black males and contribute to the adoption of self-destructive behavior. Ogbu (1987) argued that community-based "folk theories" that suggest that because of the history of discrimination against Black people, even those who work hard will never reap rewards equivalent to Whites, could contribute to self-defeating behaviors (p. 23). There is also evidence that many Black males view sports or music as more promising routes to upward mobility than academic pursuits (Hoberman, 1997,

pp. 48–49). Finally, some researchers have found that for some African American students, doing well in school is perceived as a sign that one has "sold out" or opted to "act White" for the sake of individual gain (Fordham, 1996, p. 12; Ogbu, 1990, p. 29).

Despite their importance and relevance to academic performance, risk variables and cultural pressures cannot explain individual behavior. Confronted with a variety of obstacles and challenges, some Black males still find ways to survive and in some cases, to excel. Interestingly, we know much less about resilience, perseverance, and the coping strategies employed by individuals whose lives are surrounded by hardships than we know about those who succumb and become victims of their environment. Deepening our understanding of how individuals cope with, and respond to, their social and cultural environments is an important part of finding ways to assist Black males with living healthy and productive lives.

In the social sciences, explanations of human behavior, especially that of the poor, have been the subject of considerable debate. Most often, the debate centers on those who favor structural explanations of behavior and those who prefer cultural explanations of behavior. Structuralists generally focus on political economy, the availability of jobs and economic opportunities, class structure, and social geography (Massey & Denton, 1993, pp. 7–24; Tabb, 1970, pp. 11–36; Wilson, 1978, pp. 22–46; Wilson, 1987, pp. 12–35). From this perspective, individuals are viewed as products of their environment, and changes in individual behavior are made possible by changes in the structure of opportunity. From this theoretical perspective, holding an individual responsible for their behavior makes little sense because behavior is shaped by forces beyond the control of any particular individual. Drug abuse, crime, and dropping out of school are largely seen as social consequences of inequality. According to this view, the most effective way to reduce objectionable behavior is to reduce the degree and extent of inequality in society.

In contrast, culturalists downplay the significance of environmental factors and treat human behavior as a product of beliefs, values, norms, and socialization. Cultural explanations of behavior focus on the moral codes that operate within particular families, communities, or groups (Anderson, 1990, p. 34). For example, the idea that poor people are trapped within a "culture of poverty," which has the effect of legitimizing criminal and immoral behavior, has dominated the culturalists' perspective of poverty (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963, pp. 221–267; Lewis, 1966, pp. 74–88). For the culturalists, change in behavior can only be brought about through cultural change. Hence, providing more money to inner-city schools or busing inner-city children to affluent suburban schools will do little to improve their academic performance because their attitudes toward school are shaped by the culture they brought from home and the neighborhood in which they live (Murray, 1984, pp. 147–254). According to this view, culture provides the rationale and motivation for behavior, and cultural change cannot be brought about through changes in governmental policy or by expanding opportunities.

A growing number of researchers are trying to find ways to work between the two sides of the debate. Dissatisfied with the determinism of the structuralists, which renders individuals as passive objects of larger forces, and with the "blame the victim" perspective of the culturalists, which views individuals as hopelessly trapped within a particular social/cultural milieu (Ryan, 1976, pp. 32–46), some researchers have sought to synthesize important elements from both perspectives while simultaneously paying greater attention to the importance of individual choice and agency (McLeod, 1987). From this perspective, the importance of both structure and culture is acknowledged, but so too is the understanding that individuals have the capacity to act and make choices that cannot be explained through the reductionism inherent in either framework (Morrow & Torres, 1995, pp. 112–134). The choices made by an individual may be shaped by both the available opportunities and the norms present within the cultural milieu in which they are situated. However, culture is not static and individual responses to their environment cannot be easily

predicted. Both structural and cultural forces influence choices and actions, but neither has the power to act as the sole determinant of behavior because human beings also have the ability to produce cultural forms that can counter these pressures (Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996, pp. 21–26; Willis, 1977, pp. 62–81).

This is not to suggest that because individuals have the capacity to counter these forces, many will choose or be able to do so. The effects of poverty can be so debilitating that a child's life chances can literally be determined by a number of environmental and cultural factors such as the quality of prenatal care, housing, and food available to their mothers that are simply beyond the control of an individual or even of concerted community action. It would be naive and erroneous to conclude that strength of character and the possibility of individual agency can enable one to avoid the perils present within the environment or that it is easy for individuals to choose to act outside the cultural milieu in which they were raised. Even as we recognize that individuals make choices that influence the character of their lives, we must also recognize that the range of choices available are profoundly constrained and shaped by external forces. For this reason, efforts to counter behaviors that are viewed as injurious—whether dropping out of school, selling drugs, or engaging in violent behavior—must include efforts to comprehend the logic and motivations behind the behavior. Given the importance of agency and choice, the only way to change behavioral outcomes is to understand the cognitive processes that influence how individuals adapt, cope, and respond.

In a comprehensive study of teen pregnancy, Kristen Luker (1996) demonstrated the possibility for synthesizing the two perspectives—structural and cultural explanations of human behaviors that traditionally have been seen as irreconcilable. Teen pregnancy, which for years has been much more prevalent among low-income females than middle-class White females, has traditionally been explained as either the product of welfare dependency and permissive sexual mores (the culturalists) or the unfortunate result of inadequate access to birth control and economic opportunities (the

structuralists). Through detailed interviews with a diverse sample of teen mothers, Luker put forward a different explanation that draws from both the cultural and the structural perspectives and acknowledges the role and importance of individual choice. She pointed out that although both middle-class and lower-class girls engage in premarital sex and sometimes become pregnant, middle-class girls are less likely to have babies during adolescence because they have a clear sense that it will harm their chance for future success. In contrast, when confronted with an unexpected pregnancy, poor girls are more likely to have babies; they do not perceive it as negatively affecting their future because college and a good job are already perceived as being out of reach. In fact, many girls in this situation actually believe that having a baby during adolescence will help them to settle down because they will now be responsible for another life (Luker, 1996, pp. 223–236).

Given the importance of individual "choice" to this particular behavior, any effort to reduce teen pregnancy that does not take into account the reasoning that guides decision making is unlikely to succeed. Similarly, efforts to improve the academic performance of African American males must begin by understanding the attitudes that influence how they perceive schooling and academic pursuits. To the extent that this does not happen, attempts to help Black males based primarily on the sensibilities of those who initiate them are unlikely to be effective and may be no more successful than campaigns that attempt to reduce drug use or violence by urging kids to "just say no" (Skolnick & Currie, 1994, p. 429).

Investigations into the academic orientation of Black male students must focus on the ways in which the subjective and objective dimensions of identity related to race and gender are constructed within schools and how these influence academic performance. Although psychologists have generally conceived of identity construction as a natural feature of human development (Cross, Parnham, & Helms, 1991, pp. 13–19; Erickson, 1968, p. 32), sociologists have long recognized that identities, like social roles, are imposed on individuals through various socialization processes

(Goffman, 1959, pp. 23–34). The processes and influences involved in the construction of Black male identity should be at the center of analyses of school performance because it is on the basis of their identities that Black males are presumed to be at risk, marginal, and endangered in school and throughout American society (Anderson, 1990, pp. 23–36; Gibbs, 1988, pp. 113–124; Kunjufu, 1985, p. 23).

Structural and cultural forces combine in complex ways to influence the formation of individual and collective identities, even as individuals may resist, actively or passively, the various processes involved in the molding of the "self." The fact that individuals can resist, subvert, and react against the cultural and structural forces which shape social identities compels us to recognize that individual choice, or what many scholars refer to as agency, also plays a major role in the way identities are constructed and formed (Giroux, 1983, pp. 23–36). For this reason, research on identity must pay careful attention to the attitudes and styles of behavior that African American males adopt and produce in reaction to the social environment and how these influence how they are seen and how they see themselves within the context of school. Writing on the general importance of identity to studies of schooling, Levinson et al. (1996) argued that "student identity formation within school is a kind of social practice and cultural production which both responds to, and simultaneously constitutes, movements, structures, and discourses beyond school" (p. 12).

Students can be unfairly victimized by the labeling and sorting processes that occur within school in addition to being harmed by the attitudes and behavior they adopt in reaction to these processes. For this reason, it is important to understand the factors that may enable them to resist these pressures and respond positively to various forms of assistance that may be provided within school or in the communities where they reside. By linking a focus on identity construction to an analysis of cultural production, it is the goal of this article to gain greater insight into how schools can be changed and how support programs can be designed to positively alter academic outcomes for African American males.

Identity and Academic Performance

It has long been recognized that schools are important sites of socialization. Schools are places where children learn how to follow instructions and obey rules, how to interact with others, and how to deal with authority (Apple, 1982, p. 47; Spring, 1994, p. 34). Schools are important sites for gender role socialization (Thorne, 1993, p. 22), and in most societies, they are primary sites for instruction about the values and norms associated with citizenship (Loewen, 1995, pp. 43–51; Spring, 1994, p. 16).

For many children, schools are also places where they learn about the meaning of race. Although this may occur through lesson plans adopted by teachers, it is even more likely that children learn about race through the hidden or informal curriculum (Apple, 1982, p. 64) and through nonstructured school activities such as recess (Dyson, 1994, p. 21). Even when teachers do not speak explicitly about race and racial issues with children, children become aware of physical differences related to race quite early (Tronyna & Carington, 1990, p. 18). However, children do not become aware of the significance attached to these physical differences until they start to understand the ideological dimensions of race and become cognizant of differential treatment that appears to be based on race (Miles, 1989, pp. 32–47). Name-calling, including the use of racial epithets, serves as one way of establishing racial boundaries even when children do not fully understand the meaning of the words that are used (Tronyna & Carington, 1990, p. 73). Similarly, school practices that isolate and separate children on the basis of race and gender also send children important messages about the significance of race and racial differences (Dyson, 1994, p. 34; Thorne, 1993, p. 45). Schools certainly are not the only places where children formulate views about race, but because schools are often sites where children are more likely to encounter persons of another race or ethnic group, they play a central role in influencing the character of race

relations in communities and the larger society (Peshkin, 1991, p. 65).

As young people enter into adolescence and develop a stronger sense of their individual identities (Erickson, 1968, p. 18), the meaning and significance of race also change. Where it was once an ambiguous concept based largely on differences in physical appearance, language, and styles of behavior, race becomes a more rigid identity construct as children learn the historical, ideological, and cultural dimensions associated with racial group membership (Cross et al., 1991, pp. 34–49; Tatum, 1992, p. 39). Even children who once played and interacted freely across racial lines when they were younger often experience a tightening of racial boundaries and racial identities as they get older and begin following patterns of interaction modeled by adults (Metz, 1978, p. 221; Peshkin, 1991, p. 46). Peer groups play a powerful role in shaping identity because the desire to be accepted by one's peers and "fit in" with one's peers often becomes a paramount concern for most adolescents. Research has shown that in secondary school, peer groups assume a great influence over the orientation young people adopt toward achievement (Phelan, Davidson, & Ya, 1998, pp. 10–18), and they profoundly shape the way identities are constituted in school settings (Steinberg, 1996). As adolescents become clearer about the nature of their racial and gender identities, they begin to play a more active role in maintaining and policing these identities. Peer groups are also likely to impose negative sanctions on those who violate what are perceived as established norms of behavior and who attempt to construct identities that deviate significantly from prevailing conceptions of racial and gender identity (Peshkin, 1991).

Despite the importance that several researchers have placed on the role of peer groups in the socialization process, peer groups are by no means the only forces that shape the social construction of identity within schools (Fordham, 1996, p. 47; Ogbu, 1987, p. 87; Solomon, 1992, p. 22; Steinberg, 1996, p. 185). The structure and culture of school plays a major role in reinforcing and maintaining racial categories and the

stereotypes associated with them. As schools sort children by perceived measures of their ability and as they single out certain children for discipline, implicit and explicit messages about racial and gender identities are conveyed. To the degree that White or Asian children are disproportionately placed in gifted and honors classes, the idea that such children are inherently smarter may be inadvertently reinforced. Similarly, when African American and Latino children are overrepresented in remedial classes, special education programs, or on the lists for suspension or expulsion, the idea that these children are not as smart or as well behaved is also reinforced (Ferguson, 2000, p. 134). Such messages are conveyed even when responsible adults attempt to be as fair as possible in their handling of sorting and disciplinary activities. Because the outcomes of such practices often closely resemble larger patterns of success and failure that correspond with racial differences in American society, they invariably have the effect of reinforcing existing attitudes and beliefs about the nature and significance of race.

For African American males, who are more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative forms of treatment in school, the message is clear: Individuals of their race and gender may excel in sports, but not in math or history. The location of Black males within school, in remedial classes or waiting for punishment outside the principal's office, and the roles they perform within school suggest that they are good at playing basketball or rapping, but debating, writing for the school newspaper, or participating in the science club are strictly out of bounds. Such activities are out of bounds not just because Black males may perceive them as being inconsistent with who they think they are but also because there simply are not enough examples of individuals who manage to participate in such activities without compromising their sense of self. Even when there are small numbers of Black males who do engage in activities that violate established norms, their deviation from established patterns often places them under considerable scrutiny from their peers who are likely to regard

their transgression of group norms as a sign of "selling out."

Researchers such as Ogbu and Fordham have attributed the marginality of Black students to oppositional behavior (Fordham, 1996, p. 46; Ogbu, 1987, p. 34). They argue that Black students hold themselves back out of fear that they will be ostracized by their peers. Yet, what these researchers do not acknowledge is the dynamic that occurs between Black students, males in particular, and the culture that is operative within schools. Black males may engage in behaviors that contribute to their underachievement and marginality, but they are also more likely to be channeled into marginal roles and to be discouraged from challenging themselves by adults who are supposed to help them. Finally, and most important, Ogbu and Fordham fail to take into account the fact that some Black students, including males, find ways to overcome the pressures exerted on them and manage to avoid choosing between their racial and gender identity and academic success. Even if few in number, there are students who manage to maintain their identities and achieve academically without being ostracized by their peers. Understanding how such students navigate this difficult terrain may be the key to figuring out how to support the achievement of larger numbers of Black students.

A recent experience at a high school in the Bay Area illustrates how the interplay of these two socializing forces, peer groups and school sorting practices, can play out for individual students. I was approached by a Black male student who needed assistance with a paper on *Huckleberry Finn* that he was writing for his 11th-grade English class. After reading what he had written, I asked why he had not discussed the plight of Jim, the runaway slave who is one of the central characters of the novel. The student informed me that his teacher had instructed the class to focus on the plot and not to get into issues about race because according to the teacher, that was not the main point of the story. He explained that two students in the class, both Black males, had objected to the use of the word "nigger" throughout the novel and had been told by the teacher that if they insisted on making it an issue they would have to leave the course. Both of these students opted to leave the course even though it meant that they would have to take another course that did not meet the college preparatory requirements. The student I was helping explained that because he needed the class he would just "tell the teacher what she wanted to hear." After our meeting, I looked into the issue further and discovered that one student, a Black female, had chosen a third option: She stayed in the class but wrote a paper focused on race and racial injustice, even though she knew it might result in her being penalized by the teacher.

This example reveals a number of important lessons about the intersection of identity, school practices, and academic performance. Confronted by organizational practices, which disproportionately place Black students in marginal roles and groupings, and pressure from peers, which may undermine the importance attached to academic achievement, it will take considerable confidence and courage for Black students to succeed. The four Black students in this English class were already removed from their Black peers by their placement in this honors course. In such a context, one seemed to adopt what Fordham (1996) described as a "raceless" persona (the student I was assisting) to satisfy the demands of the teacher, but this is only one of many available options. Two others responded by choosing to leave for a lower level class where they would be reunited with their peers with their identities intact but with diminished academic prospects. The option exercised by the female student in the class is perhaps the most enlightening yet difficult to enact. She challenged her teacher's instructions, choosing to write about race and racism, even though she knew she would be penalized for doing so. Yet she also had no intention of leaving the class, despite the isolation she experienced, to seek out the support of her peers.

This case reveals just some of the ways Black students may respond to the social pressures that are inherent in school experiences. Some actively resist succumbing to stereotypes or the pressure of peers, whereas others give in to these pressures in search of affirmation of their social identity. For

those who seek to help Black students and males in particular, the challenge is to find ways to support their resistance to negative stereotypes and school sorting practices and to make choosing failure a less likely option for them. The teacher mentioned in the case just described may or may not have even realized how her actions in relation to the curriculum led her Black students to make choices that would profoundly influence their education. As the following section will illustrate, when educators are aware of the social and cultural pressures exerted on students, the need to choose between one's identity and academic success can be eliminated.

Learning from Students and the Schools that Serve them Well

Fortunately, there is considerable evidence that the vast majority of Black students, including males, would like to do well in school (Anderson, 1990, p. 249; Kao & Tienda, 1998, p. 36). Additionally, there are schools where academic success for Black students is the norm and not the exception (Edmonds, 1979, p. 11; Sizemore, 1988, p. 45). Both of these facts provide a basis for hope that achievement patterns can be reversed if there is a willingness to provide the resources and support to create the conditions that nurture academic success.

In my own research at high schools in northern California, I have obtained consistent evidence that most Black students value education and would like to succeed in school. In response to a survey about their experiences in school, nearly 90% of the Black male respondents (N= 147) responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to the questions "I think education is important" and "I want to go to college." However, in response to the

questions "I work hard to achieve good grades" and "My teachers treat me fairly," less than a quarter of the respondents, 22% and 18% respectively, responded affirmatively. An analysis of just these responses to the survey suggests a disturbing discrepancy between what students claim they feel about the importance of education, the effort they expend, and the support they receive from teachers (Noguera, 2001). Similar results were obtained from a survey of 537 seniors at an academic magnet high school. African American males were least likely to indicate that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "My teachers support me and care about my success in their class" (see Table 1).

Rosalind Mickelson (1990) found similar discrepancies between expressed support for education and a commitment to hard work. Her research findings led her to conclude that some Black students experience what she referred to as an "attitude-achievement paradox." For Mickelson, the reason for the discrepancy is that although many Black students say they value education, such an expression is little more than an "abstract" articulation of belief. However, when pressed to state whether they believe that education will actually lead to a better life for them, the Black students in Mickelson's study expressed the "concrete" belief that it would not. Mickelson concluded that the contradiction between abstract and concrete beliefs toward education explains why there is a discrepancy between the attitudes expressed by Black students and their academic outcomes (pp. 42–49).

Although Mickelson's (1990) findings seem plausible, I think it is also important to consider how the experiences of Black students in schools, especially males, may result in a leveling of aspirations. If students do not believe that their teachers

Table I. "My Teachers Support Me and Care About My Success in Their Class" (in Percentages) (N = 537)

	Black Male	Black Female	Asian Male	Asian Female	White Male	White Female
Strongly agree	8	12	24	36	33	44
Agree	12	16	42	33	21	27
Disagree	38	45	16	15	18	11
Strongly disagree	42	27	18	16	28	18

care about them and are actively concerned about their academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced. In MetLife's annual survey on teaching, 39% of students surveyed ($N = 3,961$) indicated that they trust their teachers "only a little or not at all"; when the data from the survey were disaggregated by race and class, minority and poor students indicated significantly higher levels of distrust (47% of minorities and 53% of poor students stated that they trusted their teachers only a little or not at all) (MetLife, 2000, p. 184). Though it is still possible that some students will succeed even if they do not trust or feel supported by their teachers, research on teacher expectations suggests that these feelings have a powerful effect on student performance (Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995, pp. 124–125). Moreover, there is research that suggests that the performance of African Americans, more so than other students, is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement that they receive from teachers (Foster, 1997, p. 122; Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 36; Lee, 2000, p. 57). To the extent that this is true, and if the nature of interactions between many Black male students and their teachers tends to be negative, it is unlikely that it will be possible to elevate their achievement without changing the ways in which they are treated by teachers and the ways in which they respond to those who try to help them.

However, there are schools where African American male students do well and where high levels of achievement are common. For example, a recent analysis of the academic performance indicators of public schools in California revealed that there are 22 schools in the state where Black students compose 50% or more of the student population and have aggregate test scores of 750 or greater (1,000 is the highest possible score) (Foster, 2001). Most significantly, when the test-score data for these schools were disaggregated on the basis of race and gender, there was no evidence of an achievement gap. Though schools such as these are few in number, given the fact that there are more than 2,000 public schools in California, the fact that they exist suggests that similar results should be possible elsewhere.

Researchers who have studied effective schools have found that such schools possess the following characteristics: (a) a clear sense of purpose, (b) core standards within a rigorous curriculum, (c) high expectations, (d) a commitment to educate all students, (e) a safe and orderly learning environment, (f) strong partnerships with parents, and (g) a problem-solving attitude (Murphy & Hallinger, 1985; Sizemore, 1988). Though the criteria used to determine effectiveness rely almost exclusively on data from standardized tests and ignore other criteria, there is no disagreement that such schools consistently produce high levels of academic achievement among minority students. Researchers on effective schools for low-income African American students also cite the supportive relations that exist between teachers and students and the ethos of caring and accountability that pervade such schools as other essential ingredients of their success (Sizemore, 1988). Educational reformers and researchers must do more to investigate ways to adopt strategies that have proven successful at schools where achievement is less likely. As Ron Edmonds (1979), formerly one of the leading researchers on effective schools, stated, "We already know more than enough to successfully educate all students" (p. 26). The challenge before educators and policy makers is to find ways to build on existing models of success.

Unfortunately, most African American children are not enrolled in effective schools that nurture and support them while simultaneously providing high quality instruction. Even as pressure is exerted to improve the quality of public education so that the supply of good schools is increased, other strategies must be devised at the community level to provide Black children with support. For example, there are long-standing traditions within Jewish and many Asian communities to provide children with religious and cultural instruction outside of school. In several communities throughout the United States, Black parents are turning to churches and community organizations as one possible source of such support (McPartland & Nettles, 1991). In northern California, organizations such as Simba and the

Omega Boys Club (both community-based mentoring programs) provide African American males with academic support and adult mentors outside of school (Watson & Smitherman, 1996). Organizations such as these affirm the identities of Black males by providing them with knowledge and information about African and African American history and culture and by instilling a sense of social responsibility toward their families and communities (Ampim, 1993; Myers, 1988). Unfortunately, these organizations are small and are largely unable to serve the vast numbers of young people in need. Moreover, it is unlikely that such organizations can completely counter the harmful effects of attendance in unsupportive and even hostile schools because they are designed to complement learning that is supposed to take place in school. Still, the model they provide demonstrates that it is possible to work outside of schools to have a positive influence on the academic performance of African American youth. Given their relative success but small size, it would be advisable to find ways to replicate them elsewhere.

Drawing from the research on mentoring and student resilience that has identified strategies that are effective in supporting the academic achievement of African American students, community organizations and churches can attempt to compensate for the failings of schools. Through after-school and summer school programs, these groups can provide young people with access to positive role models and social support that can help buffer young people from the pressures within their schools and communities (Boykin, 1983). Although such activities should not be seen as a substitute for making public schools more responsive to the communities that they serve, they do represent a tangible action that can be taken immediately to respond to the needs of Black youth, particularly males who often face the greatest perils.

Conclusion: The Need for Further Research

Although this article made reference to the cultural norms, attitudes, and styles of behavior African American males may adopt and produce that can diminish the importance they attach to academic achievement, the emphasis of this paper has been on the ways in which schools disserve and underserve this population of students. Such an emphasis is necessary because research on effective schools has shown that when optimal conditions for teaching and learning are provided, high levels of academic success for students, including African American males, can be achieved. Put differently, if we can find ways to increase the supply of effective schools, it may be possible to mitigate against some of the risks confronting Black males. This does not mean the question of how to influence the attitudes, behaviors, and stances of Black males toward school and education generally does not need to be addressed or that it does not require further investigation. To the extent that we recognize that all students are active participants in their own education and not passive objects whose behavior can be manipulated by adults and reform measures, then the importance of understanding how to influence behavior cannot be understated. Learning how to influence the attitudes and behaviors of African American males must begin with an understanding of the ways in which structural and cultural forces shape their experiences in school and influence the construction of their identities. In this regard, it is especially important that future research be directed toward a greater understanding of youth culture and the processes related to cultural production.

Like popular culture, youth culture—and all of the styles and symbols associated with it—is dynamic and constantly changing. This is particularly true for inner-city African American youth whose speech, dress, music, and tastes often establish trends for young people across America. For many adults, this culture is also impenetrable and often incomprehensible. Yet, despite the difficulty of understanding and interpreting youth culture, it is imperative that efforts to help Black youth be guided by ongoing attempts at understanding the cultural forms they produce and the ways in which they respond and adapt to their social and cultural environment. Without such an understanding, efforts to influence the attitudes and behaviors of

African American males will most likely fail to capture their imaginations and be ignored.

The importance of understanding youth culture became clear when embarking on research on how the popular media influences the attitudes of young people toward violence. Part of this research attempted to study how young people react to violent imagery in films by watching segments of popular movies with groups of middle school students and discussing their interpretations and responses to the ways violence was depicted. Following a series of discussions of their moral and ethical judgments of the violence conveyed in the films, the students asked to watch the film *Menace to Society* as part of the research exercise. Surprisingly, several of the students owned copies of the film and many had seen the film so many times that they had memorized parts of the dialogue. The film, which tells the story of a young man growing up in south central Los Angeles, is filled with graphic images of violence. After viewing, it became apparent that there might be some truth to the idea that violent films do condition young people to rationalize violent behavior as a legitimate and appropriate way for resolving conflicts and getting what they want. However, when discussing the film, it became clear that most were repulsed by the violence even though they were entertained by it, and rather than identifying with perpetrators of violence in the film, they identified most strongly with those characters who sought to avoid it (Noguera, 1995).

This experience and others like it made me realize how easy it is for adults to misinterpret and misunderstand the attitudes and behavior of young people. Generational differences, especially when compounded by differences in race and class, often make it difficult for adults to communicate effectively with youth. Many adults are aware of the chasm that separates them from young people, yet adults typically take actions intended to benefit young people without ever investigating whether the interventions meet the needs or concerns of youth. There is a need to consult with young people on how the structure and culture of schools contribute to low academic achievement and to enlist their input when interventions to improve student performance are being designed and implemented.

In addition to research on youth culture, there is a pressing need for further research on how identities—especially related to the intersection of race, class, and gender—are constructed within schools and how these identities affect students' attitudes and dispositions toward school, learning, and life in general. Presently such an analysis is largely absent from the policies and measures that are pursued to reform schools and improve classroom practice. Consistently, the focus of reform is on what adults and schools should do to improve student achievement, with students treated as passive subjects who can easily be molded to conform to our expectations. To devise a policy that will enable successes achieved in a particular program, classroom, or school to be replicated elsewhere, we must be equipped with an understanding of the process through which identities are shaped and formed within schools. There is also a need for further research on peer groups and their role in influencing the academic orientation of students.

Much of what I know about the plight of African American males comes from my personal experience growing up as a Black male and raising two sons. I have an intuitive sense that the way we are socialized to enact our masculinity, especially during adolescence, is a major piece of the problem. Researchers such as Geneva Smitherman (1977) and others have argued that Black children, and males in particular, often behave in ways that are perceived as hostile and insubordinate by adults (p. 234). Others suggest that males generally, and Black males especially, have particularly fragile egos and are susceptible to treating even minor slights and transgressions as an affront to their dignity and sense of self-respect (Kunjufu, 1985, p. 16; Madhubuti, 1990, p. 88; Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 92; West, 1993, p. 47). Such interpretations resonate with my own experience, but it is still not clear how such knowledge can be used to intervene effectively on behalf of African American males.

I recall that as a young man, I often felt a form of anger and hostility that I could not attribute to a particular incident or cause. As a teacher, I have

observed similar forms of hostility among Black male students, and for the past 3 years, I have witnessed my eldest son exhibit the same kinds of attitudes and behavior. Undoubtedly, some of this can be explained as a coping strategy: Black males learn at an early age that by presenting a tough exterior it is easier to avoid threats or attacks (Anderson, 1990, p. 38). It may also be true, and this is clearly speculation, that the various ways in which Black males are targeted and singled out for harsh treatment (at school or on the streets by hostile peers or by the police) elicit postures of aggression and ferocity toward the world.

Given the range and extent of the hardships that beset this segment of the population, there is no doubt that there are some legitimate reasons for young Black males to be angry. Yet, it is also clear that this thinly veiled rage and readiness for conflict can be self-defeating and harmful to their well-being. One of the consequences of this hostility and anger may be that such attitudes and behaviors have a negative effect on their academic performance. Adults, especially women, may be less willing to assist a young male who appears angry or aggressive. A colleague of mine has argued that what some refer to as the "fourth grade syndrome" the tendency for the academic performance of Black males to take a decisive downward turn at the age of 9 or 10, may be explained by the fact that this is the age when Black boys start to look like young men (Hilliard, 1991, p. 113; Kunjufu, 1985, p. 18). Ferguson (2000) found in his research in Shaker Heights, Ohio, that Black students were more likely than White students to cite "toughness" as a trait they admired in others (p. 23). If these researchers are correct, and if the toughness admired by Black males evokes feelings of fear among some of their teachers, it is not surprising that trouble in school would be common. Gaining a clearer understanding of this phenomenon may be one important part of the process needed for altering academic trends among Black males.

Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that until we find ways to change the attitudes and behaviors of Black males, nothing can be done to improve their academic performance. There is no doubt that if schools were to become more nurturing and supportive, students would be more likely to perceive schools as a source of help and opportunity rather than an inhospitable place that one should seek to escape and actively avoid. Changing the culture and structure of schools such that African American male students come to regard them as sources of support for their aspirations and identities will undoubtedly be the most important step that can be taken to make high levels of academic achievement the norm rather than the exception.

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