

# Educating African American Males

December 24, 2010

Dr. Edward E. Bell



10

Dr. Edward E. Bell



## UNDERSTANDING BLACK MALES

Schools across America spend money, invest in programs, sponsor workshops, offer teacher incentives, raise accountability standards, and even evoke the name of *Obama* in efforts to raise the academic achievement of African American males. More is needed!

***Abstract:***

***Background:*** Schools across America spend money, invest in programs, and sponsor workshops, offer teacher incentives, raise accountability standards, and even evoke the name of *Obama* in efforts to raise the academic achievement of African American males. Incarceration and college retention rates point to a dismal plight for many African American males.

***Purpose:*** The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how African American males feel about school.

***Setting:*** The research took place in a rural North Carolina middle school.

***Study Sample:*** 21 male students; 18 African Americans, 1 Hispanic and 2 Whites, in grades 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>.

***Intervention:*** Participants took part in-depth interviews and discussions.

***Data Collection and Analysis:*** A qualitative design was best suited for this study.

Unstructured interviewing, the School Perceptions Questionnaire, and the Who Am I exercise were measures used to collect data by identifying common themes as a result axial and open-coding procedures. Peer examination and member checking were used as strategies to gauge the trustworthiness and dependability of that data.

***Findings:*** The following themes emerged from the data: students wanted to excel and go to college. The lack of social skills for learning emerged from the data, which interfered with student learning. The data revealed more preoccupation with “being handsome” than “being self-disciplined.”

***Conclusion:*** Social skills must be taught to African American students. Not staying on task, not following directions, and eradicating mama jokes must stop. African American males must be socially prepared for the academic environment.

# Understanding Black Males

**A**frican American males need earlier positive experiences within a learning environment that prepare them for ongoing engagement in the academic process. Many African American males do not attend quality preschool programs or participate in early learning opportunities (McCall, 1993). These types of experiences may better prepare African American males for learning. “School is the first public place that many children get the opportunity to demonstrate mastery and competence outside of their early family environment” (Rounds-Bryant, 2008, p. 27). Rounds-Bryant (2008) concluded that early failure in school typically leads to classroom frustration, academic withdrawal, and negative behavior. Head Start or other similar programs may also provide an early educational experience for African American males to cultivate their social skills (McCall, 1993).

Schools across America spend money, invest in programs, sponsor workshops, offer teacher incentives, raise accountability standards, and even evoke the name of Obama in efforts to raise the academic achievement of African American males. Incarceration and college retention rates point to a dismal plight for many African American males. Money, policies, reform practices, redistricting, and standards are in place to stop the trajectory of African American males from academic peril. Yet in most instances, the spiral of African American males’ education continues to plummet exponentially. This leads to the conclusion that an important construct for effectively teaching African American males is being neglected: “socialization for learning” for African American males.

### Literature Review

The experience of African American males in America is unlike any other experience faced by other immigrants (Douglass, 2007). During slavery, African Americans were dehumanized and treated as inferior based solely on skin color (Douglass, 2007; Anton, 2009). African American males are often thought of as possessing less than acceptable qualities such as being lazy and irresponsible (Douglass, 2007; Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer, 2003). African American males may be experiencing the residual effects of slavery, and their academic performance may be linked inextricably to teacher biases and/or the cultural dispositions of others (Douglas, 2007).

Historically, African Americans have been the beneficiary of self-hatred and the looming effects of slavery (Douglass, 2007). Many African American males have internalized negative stereotypes about themselves, their looks, and their abilities. As a result, these negatively held beliefs of the dominant culture may have retarded the academic potential of African American males (Douglass, 2007; Bell, 2009). “The treatment that blacks [African Americans] have received from white American society has contributed greatly to the development of their self-hatred” (Douglas, 2007, p.4).

#### **Socializing African American Males**

Socializing African American males for educational success is critical in forging academic success and prowess in this often neglected population (Bell, 2010; Bell, 2009). Many African American males lack the social skills to effectively compete in today’s classrooms. Simple skills like raising hands, being called on, and following directions are tasks that prevent an alarming number of African American males from engaging in the learning process. Preparing African American males for socialized learning is paramount (Bell, 2010; Bell, 2009).

Although the past achievements of African Americans are important, the “Raheems” and the “DayQuans” need to observe successful role models they can touch and see. Merely resting on the laurels of Dr. King's accomplishments is not enough. “Blacks [African Americans] frequently have no clear, positive, or realistic adult ambition...“They wish to succeed, but have no clear notion of how or what that will entail for them” (Hare & Hare, 1991, p.10). Invariably, they will have extreme difficulty finding role models (Hare & Hare, 1991). They cannot relate to Malcolm X, Ella Barker, Barbara Jordan, or James Baldwin because these are giants of the past. African American males need positive role models for the present.

**M**any African American males come to school without adequate social skills to function in a classroom environment. These males are confronted with two “selves”: the “one-self,” which depicts what community and peers expect of them, and the “other-self,” what the school expects of them (Bell, 2010; Bell, 2009). When the African American male cannot bring the two selves together, the one-self emerges when it is time to enter the school building. Common courtesy, raising hands, active listening, being self-disciplined, being prepared, and waiting your turn are only a few of the needed social skills that African American males must possess and display in today’s classrooms (Bell, 2010b; Bell, 2009). As simplistic as these may sound, these traits must be internalized by African American males. When these skills are not developed at home or in the community, it becomes difficult for African American males to transfer those skills into the school environment. Majors and Billson (1992) concluded that African American males’ behavior is often misinterpreted. Misinterpretation can cause educators to conclude that African American males are innately rude and have an aversion towards schooling (Majors and Billson, 1992).

The culture of learning in most schools comes with expectations. Many African American males must come to appreciate school for its primary purpose, a place to learn. Good and Brophy (1995) discussed factors that teachers can implement to teach social learning to students such as addressing realistic perceptions of students while concomitantly enjoying teaching. Teachers must present clear and consistent roles and respond to a crisis in a fair and equitable manner. The following strategies might impact learning for African American males:

- Develop initiatives to appropriately and productively channel potentially self-destructive emotions,
- Focus on sharpening and broadening communication skills (“Obama” style),
- Showcase examples of successful, living African American males,
- Model appropriate social skills,
- Teach the concept of “code switching.”

Comer (1988) concluded that students bring experiences to the classroom which may be contrary to what the school expects. African American males must be taught how to survive in today’s classrooms (Bell, 2010a). Raising African American males can be a challenging pursuit in a world that tends to undervalue the culture and achievements of this population (Hare and Hare, 1991; Bell, 2009; Douglass, 2007).

### **Methods**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how African American males feel about school. Qualitative research is concerned with interpreting human behaviors from the viewpoint of those who have experienced them (Milacci, 2003). Qualitative research uses a

naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings and “where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2001, p. 39).

The sample for this study was selected utilizing a purposive sampling method, which is used when a researcher aims to understand and/or gain insight of a specific population (Merriam, 1988). Purpose sampling is chosen because the sample provides the researcher with information about the phenomena (McMillan and Schmacher, 1997). The participants for the study were chosen by the principal, which was based on the number of suspensions and low test grades. The participants were called to a classroom designated by the principal. Twenty-one students participated in this inquiry. The sample consisted of 18 African American males, 1 Hispanic male, and 2 White males, in grades sixth to eighth, from a middle school in eastern North Carolina. The principal wanted to include all students; however, the results of this study concentrated primarily on the African American males. This study was conducted over a 3-day period in December 2009, for up to 45 minutes per session. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study and verbally consented to remain.

The methodology involved the qualitative analysis of data collected from the School Perceptions Questionnaire (SPQ), Who Am I exercise (list of adjectives prepared by the researcher), and unstructured interviews and presented as quasi-statistics; however, the use of numerical/quantitative data in qualitative research studies and reports has been controversial (Maxwell, 2010). Two questions that guided the researcher in this study:

1. Would African American students enjoy school?
2. Would African American students lack the social skills for learning?

For this study, the qualitative data were analyzed after transcribing all interviews and coding them in two phases: open-coding procedures were used in the data analysis to identify common themes, identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena (Glaser, 1992;



Creswell and Miller, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and axial coding, which is the process of relating codes (categories and properties) to each other, via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking and was also used in the analysis of this data ( Glaser, 1992; Creswell and Miller, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The declaration of researcher bias in qualitative inquiry is known (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The researcher is an African American male, who has worked as a middle school teacher and a school counselor. Moreover, the researcher has worked with at-risk African American males and was awarded the prestigious Nancy Susan Reynolds, an award given yearly by the Z Smith Reynolds Foundation, for working with at-risk black males. The researcher's experiences add credibility to the findings.

The authenticity of the results was maintained by peer examination, member checking, and prolonged engagement of the participants as strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and the credibility of the findings (Byrne, 2001; Shenton, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) concluded that qualitative research is not based on getting the same results, but whether the results are sensible, dependable, and consistent. Lincoln and Guba (1985) concluded that the extensive use of auditing will ultimately improve data analysis dependability and conformability, leading to more meaningful and useful results.

### **Results**

The results are based on the observations of the African American students in the study as measured by the SPQ, unstructured interviewing, the Who Am I exercise, a list of adjectives prepared by the researcher. The three key themes emerged from the data analysis in this study are: (a) students wanted to excel; (b) students wanted to go to college; (c) students lacked social

skills for learning. Finally, retrospective conclusions are drawn in the below sections from the following measures:

### SPQ

The SPQ is an instrument designed to measure identification with academics (Osborne, 2007; Osborne, Kellow, and Jones, 2007). Osborne (2007) showed that identification with academics can predict academic outcomes. This investigation used five questions from the SPQ:

- (1) “Being a good student is important to me.”
- (2) “School is very boring to me.”
- (3) “I plan to go to school.”
- (4) “Teachers do not care about me.”
- (5) “I do not care whether I get good grades or bad grades.”

The analysis revealed the following key themes: “liking school and wanting to go to college.” Most of the students (70%) like being a good student. In addition, most students (60%) plan to attend college. For example, the participants responded in the following manner: “I want to get to North Carolina Central University.” “Well, I want State.” “I am going to Howard, maybe Oregon.” “I’m smart enough to go to college, that I know.” “They tell me that college is real hard, don’t know if I’m that smart.” “The work you hard, man.” “They try to trick us.” “Man, I am doing my best.” “Yea, I do flunk some classes.” “School work is not that important.” “I like school.” Students cared about getting good grades, yet the majority had poor grades. Many of the participants were woefully prepared for college.

Students had some ambivalent feelings regarding how teachers felt about them. Out of 20 students who responded to “teachers don’t care about me”, 7 students disagreed strongly, 2

disagreed mildly, 7 neutral, 1 agreed mildly, and 3 agreed strongly. “Teachers are mean.” “Some [teachers] are nice to you.” Look, I be [am] nice and they still are mean, so what do you do?”

“One time, you see, I was nice, and she [teacher] still was hating on me, dang.”

The issue of boredom cannot be dismissed. From the data, it was unclear whether students thought school was “boring,” only 30% thought school was not boring, yet during interviews, students responded that they “enjoyed school.” For example, the participants reported the following as key themes: “Easy work at times.” “I rush right through that work.” “School is exciting.” “They give boring and easy work, we ain’t babies.” “They [teachers] [are] wild.” “One time, I was really darn bored.” “I started to throw paper at my friend.” A bored student causes classroom disruptions, falls behind academically, and is also suspended often (Bell, 2009).

### **Unstructured Interviewing**

The purpose of the unstructured interviewing was to create an environment where African American males could openly talk about schooling. The interviews were informative for the investigator. All participants (21) were males; 18 were African American, 1 was Hispanic, and 2 were White. The focus of the unstructured interviews yielded the following key themes from the African American participants: “Life is hard man.” “People don’t care most times.” “I am trying to work harder.” “I hate this school.” “We be trying to work [do] good in school.” “I want to be rich.” “I am going to college to be famous.” “People like to fight and hurt you.” “I am good most times in school.” “Ain’t dropping out of school, you know they [teachers] want us, too.” The data suggest that participants wanted to succeed in life. They had a sense of wanting to do good.

### **Who Am I**

The African American students in this inquiry participated in a Who Am I exercise. They were given a list of the 50 frequently used words (as prepared by the researcher) that might be descriptive of self such as being caring and happy. Based on the analysis, the common following common themes emerged: (a) being handsome (b) being successful. In particular, this group placed more emphasis on being handsome (60%) than on being self-disciplined (10%). The results support the belief that being handsome is more important to this group than being self-disciplined. A self-disciplined student tends to be more focused academically (Bell, 2009). Lack of self-discipline is a primary reason that African American males are suspended and incarcerated more than any other population (Bell, 2009).

The majority of the students were below grade-level proficiency; however, 80% of these students saw themselves as successful. Success for these students may not be linked to academic achievement. Their definition of success may not be linked to how the majority culture defines the term. For many African American males, simply making it to the school may be an act of success. Being happy (20%) was not a valuable trait for these students. However, being happy has some implications for one's self-esteem and the psychological framework for learning and achieving (Baumeister, Campbell, Krieger, and Vohs, 2003; Bell, 2009; Bell, 2010a).

The study was not free from social challenges. Students had to be redirected several times during the study. Taking turns, respecting opinions, being off task, talking without permission, constant laughing, and depicting a battery of anti-social behaviors presented as troubling behaviors for the students and the researcher. The redirection of behaviors took some time away from the constant flow of implementing the study. The participant's behavior appeared to have

been representative of their conduct in the traditional classroom. Therefore, such behavior during the study leads the researcher to postulate the significance of teaching appropriate social skills to African American males. African American males must be taught the skills for effective communicating and processing in a classroom. However, the investigator observed their behavior to be a lack of social skills for learning rather than a dislike for the educational process.

### **Anecdotal Information**

**T**he focus of the investigation was on African American males. However, the following anecdotal information is worth mentioning. The White students came to the discussion forum with paper and pencil (African American students did not). Paper and pencils were not required. The sole Hispanic student was highly interactive with the investigator and provided substantive feedback. For example, the Hispanic student reported the following: “Education is needed for life, and my family is counting on me and others to make it.” The White students were observant and reticent. On the other hand, the African American males were often elusive, vociferous, and playful. They were often off-task and had to be redirected several times.

**T**he study was meaningful and enlightening. The participants were initially hesitant to participant. They wanted to know more about the researcher. After sharing personal and professional accounts of my life, they began to share and participate in the study. It was obvious that they needed to feel comfortable. The African American males in the study had to be redirected several times. Their behaviors were not grossly disrespectful, but rather inappropriate for a classroom setting. They were very comfortable with their conduct. As a former middle school teacher, this study provided an opportunity to interact with middle school students, again.

## Discussion

This research began with two basic research questions: (a) Would African American students enjoy school? (b) Would African American students lack the social skills for learning? African American males continue to face a myriad of academic, social, and cultural factors that can hamper their learning potential (Steele, 1992; Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer, 2003; Bell, 2009). One of the participants reported the following and emerged as a common theme: “They [teachers] know some of us are doing our best, and we want to do good.” “You think they [teachers] know how we live.” Another student made the following statement and was representative of the participants: “People tease you about what you wear.” Bell (2009) in his research concluded that African American students face social and cultural issues that impeded their academic performance, which supports the findings of this study.

African American students have a history marred by underachievement and low expectations, coupled with practices and measures that systematically place African American males at risk academically (Douglas, 2007; Anton, 2009; Bell, 2010a). African American males are not reaping their fair share of academic success. The academic achievement gap between African American students and their contemporaries continues to be a national educational concern (White, 2009).

**A**frican American males do have a responsibility for their own learning. African American males must develop the social skills that will allow them to learn (Bell, 2009; Butler, 1999). They must be attentive, on-task, engaged, polite, and free from disruptive behaviors that place them at risk academically. In addition, African American males must develop effective communication and meaningful vocabulary development. Participants exhibited disruptive classroom behavior during the study

and had to be redirected such as excessive laughter, anger, rudeness, “clowning,” and joking. Bell (2009) concluded in his study that disruptive behaviors can thwart the instructional process. Teachers and educators often lack the cultural disposition to understand these behaviors (Steele, 1992). Steele (1992) concluded in his research that African American students are often marred by beliefs of inferiority and low expectations. As a result, African American male students will continue to fall prey to suspensions, low test scores, and academic failure (Bell, 2010; Bell, 2009). Tasks like removing students from class, quieting them down, rebuking negative behavior, stopping fights, eradicating “momma” jokes, and eliminating loud verbal exchanges inhibit classroom teachers from doing their primary job of teaching (Bell, 2009; Levin, 2005).

This study focused on one rural middle school in North Carolina. The study provides a look at how African American students view school and their socialization towards school in one middle school in North Carolina. Therefore, transferability may be limited as a result. This investigation supports the assumption that social skills may aid African American males in developing the resolve to become better learners. More research needs to focus on the importance of developing social skills in African American males that will ultimately improve their academic achievement. Bell (2009) concluded in his research that social skills may be linked to student achievement. Instilling appropriate social and academic values into the learning repertoire of African American males may positively impact their academic achievement. African American males also need to observe the positive social skills of successful black male adults (Bell, 2009).

The participants in this study wanted to succeed academically and attend college. The data revealed more preoccupation with “being handsome” than “being self-disciplined.” In general, the researcher found that students wanted to learn and enjoyed coming to school, yet

these students were low achievers and aligned themselves with traits that seemed to contradict fostering academic excellence.

### **Conclusion**

Key conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, there was a powerful sense that each student wanted to succeed and do well in school. However, many of them currently lack the academic preparation and skills to be college ready, at this time. In addition, the students were often times off task and had to be reminded repeatedly to stop talking, respect others, stop joking, and stop hitting! These behaviors, at times, prevented the researcher from conducting the research.

**A**frican American males need to be taught social development. The social learning theory is built on modeling attitudes, dispositions, and reflections of others (Bandura, 1977). As a result, the social development of a negative culture is developing (Mooney, 2000). The constructivism theory postulates that learning is constructed from reflecting on prior experiences and extrapolating old information with new knowledge (Bruner, 1960).

The social cost of inadequate and ill-conceived education for African American males is enormous (Levin, 2005). Not educating African American males has serious implications not only for this population, but also for the nation (Levin, 2005). Washington (1884) concluded that the “proper education of all the whites will benefit the Negro [African American] as much as the education of the Negro [African American] will benefit the whites.” W. E. B. Dubois (1903) concluded that “the Negro [African American] race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional [African American] men.” We must save African American males. Are they worth saving?



### References

- Anton, M. (2009). *Socialization through material objects: the relationship of implicit racial and ethnic socialization and child problem behaviors*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Virginia.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. New York: General Learning Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., Campbell J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *American Psychological Society, 4*(1), 2003.
- Bell, E. E. (2010a). *Letters and Lessons for Teachers*. Raleigh, NC: All About Children.
- Bell, E. E. (2010b). *Understanding African American Males*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED511010)
- Bell, E.E. (2009). *Impact of self-esteem and identification with academics on the academic achievement of Black males students*. Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (10084)
- Bruner, J. (1960). *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, D. M. (1999, April). *Social skills and problem behaviors as contextual variables in African American education: students with and without disabilities*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- Byrne, M. M. (2001). Evaluating the findings of qualitative research. *AORN Journal*, Retrieved from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0SL/is-3/73](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SL/is-3/73)
- Comer, J. (1997) *Waiting for a miracle: Why schools can't solve our problems – and how we can*. New York: Dutton.

- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 124-131.
- Dubois, W. E. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. A.C. McClurg and Company: Chicago.
- Douglas, Khionna. (2007). *Being black and its effects on one's self-esteem*. Unpublished manuscript, York College of the City University of New York.
- Glasser, B. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis: Emergence vs. forcing*. Mil Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Good, T., & Brophy, J. (1995). *Contemporary Educational Psychology* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) New York: Harper Collins.
- Hare, N. & Hare, J. (1991). *The miseducation of the black child*. Banneker Books. San Francisco: CA.
- Levin, H. M. (2005). *The social costs of inadequate education*. Paper presented at the Teachers College Symposium on Educational Equity. Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2010). Using number in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16 (6), 475-482, Retrieved from <http://qix.sagepub.com/content/16/6/476>
- Majors, R., & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books.
- McCall, R.B (1983). A conceptual approach to early mental development. In: Lewis M, editor. *Origins of intelligence*. 2. New York, NY: Plenum; 1983. pp. 67–106.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Case study in research in education. A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

- McMillian, J. H. & Schumacher, S. (1997). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Longman.
- Milacci, F. (2003). *A step towards faith: The limitations of spirituality in adult education practice*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.
- Miles, M., & Huberman (1994). *Analyzing qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mooney, C. G. (2000). *An introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Osborne, J. W., Kellow, J. T., & Jones, B. D. (2007). *Identification with academics, stereotype threat, and motivation to achieve in school*. Unpublished manuscript, North Carolina State University.
- Osborne, J. W., & Walker, C. (2007). Stereotype threat, identification with academics, and withdrawal from school: why the most successful students of colour might be most likely to withdraw. *Educational Psychology, 26*(4), 563-577.
- Patton, M. Q. (2001). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Rounds-Bryant, J. L. (2008). *It takes a village to raise a criminal*. Mental Health Solutions. Research Triangle Park: NC.
- Shenton, A. K. (2003). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*, 63-75.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage.
- Steele, C. M. (1992). Race and the schooling of black Americans. *The Atlantic Monthly, 269*(4), 67-78.
- Swanson, D. P., Cunningham, M., & Spencer, M. B. (2003). Black males' structural conditions,

achievement, patterns, normative needs, and “opportunities.” *Urban Education*, 38(5), 608-633.

Washington, Booker T. (1884, July 16). *The Educational Outlook in the South*. Retrieved February 2, 2010, from <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document>

White, H. E. (2009). *Increasing the achievement of African American males. Report from the Department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment* (No. 3). Virginia Beach City Public Schools.