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The Scholar Identity Institute: Guiding Darnel and Other Black Males

Despite the major push for higher student outcomes in graduation, school achievement, and test scores, even when legislated (NCLB, 2001), too many students fail to persist in school, often choosing to drop out as their last resort (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Specifically, one third of our nation's students drop out of school, even when they are not failing in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Further, half of Black and Latino students do not graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). A number of studies have been conducted on factors that contribute to students' school disengagement and ultimate withdrawal. In this column, I briefly examine recent reports on diverse students who dropped out of high school, and then discuss a program (the Scholar Identity Institute) that is designed to promote a scholar identity among Black males.

The Dropout Epidemic Among Diverse Students

In a recent report funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Bridgeland et al. (2006) shared the perspectives of almost 500 culturally diverse students, aged 16 to 25, who had dropped out of school. What is most troubling about this report is that 88% of the dropouts had passing grades in school. Students shared the following reasons for dropping out:

- almost half (47%) of the students dropped out because classes were not interesting,
- forty-five percent reported that they started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling,
- twenty-nine percent expressed significant doubts about being able to meet the high school's requirements for graduation,
- thirty-two percent were required to repeat a grade before their decision,
- thirty-two percent had to get a job and needed money,
- almost two thirds reported missing class often, and
- thirty-eight percent believed they had "too much freedom" and not enough rules and structure.

In addition to the reasons listed above, these diverse students shared several other telling perspectives. First, 81% recognized that graduating from high school was vital to their success. Second, 74% said that if they were able to relive the experience, they would have stayed in school. Added to this, 70% were confident that they could have graduated if they had put forth the necessary effort. When examined by GPA, 80% of those with a high GPA were very or somewhat confident, and 72% with an average GPA and 58% of those with a low GPA were very or somewhat confident.

Previous studies on students who drop out of school indicate that they lacked positive or strong relationships with a caring teacher or educator. In the Gates report (Bridgeland et al., 2006), this finding was also evident: 33% reported not having at least one teacher or staff member who cared about his or her success; 43% reported not having at least one teacher or staff member to talk with about school problems; and 57% reported not having at least one teacher or staff member to talk with about personal problems. In one student's words:

If they related to me more and understand that at that point in time, my life was . . . what I was going through, where I lived, where I came from, who knows? That book might have been in my book bag. I might have bought a book bag, and done some work (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 12)

Collectively, these findings, through the lens of diverse students, paint a picture that is all too common across our nation's schools: Diverse students are capable of succeeding in schools (e.g., high GPAs) and the majority know that graduating from high school is crucial; however, too few put forth the required effort to succeed, too few find school interesting, and too few report caring relationships with educators. Although not specifically discussed in the report, surely some of these diverse students were gifted.

How students view themselves as learners is important to consider when trying to promote their achievement and confidence in school. It is clear that students who lack confidence in school become unmotivated and unengaged, and they find their identities in other areas (such as sports and entertainment; Roderick, 2003; Whiting, 2006). In other words, students with an underdeveloped sense of self-efficacy are more likely than others to be at risk for poor achievement (Bandura, 1977; Ford, 1996). Stated another way, they are less likely to be resilient—to persist in school and be high achievers. Further, the probability of these students being identified as gifted decreases considerably (Ford, 1996, 2006; Moore et al., 2006). Many times, these unmotivated, underachieving, and unidentified students are disproportionately Black and Hispanic males (Grantham, 2004; Hébert, 2001; Whiting, 2006). As of 2002, data reveal that Black males comprise 8.7% of school districts nationally, but 3.65% of gifted programs; Hispanic males comprise 9.13% of the school population, but 5.05% of gifted programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Thus, although educators are rightfully concerned with the most effective ways to identify giftedness in students and ways to promote higher achievement and motivation, the urgency seems most apparent for Black and Hispanic males.

Darnel's Story

For several years, I have worked with Black males of all ages, so many of whom are capable of great things, but so few achieve this greatness. During an annual summer program called the Scholar Identity Institute (SII) that I cofounded, I've had the opportunity to work with 30 to 70 Black males in grades 5–10 for 2 weeks. Although all

of the young men were special, one stood out among them: Darnel (name has been changed) was intelligent (perceptive, intuitive, inquisitive), social/extraverted, unsure of himself, and angry. Daily, I recognized his potential to do great things—to be a leader, to complete assignments with high marks, to show a strong work ethic; daily, he chose another route. He took on the role of class clown, instigated tension among students, refused to follow rules and directions, and frequently denied contributing to or causing trouble.

He was an intelligent yet unmotivated and underachieving Black male (as often discussed in the scholarship of Donna Ford, Tarek Grantham, and Tom Hébert). Working with Darnel, I saw his potential to be a strong student and leader; unfortunately, he had yet to see himself as a scholar.

The Summer Scholar Identity Institute

The SII is a 2-week program held at Vanderbilt University during the summer from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m. each day. At the time of this writing, the SII was in its third year, having begun in 2006. Lectures, activities, and readings are used to educate students and change their views and attitudes about school and learning. An average of 40 Black males attend the SII each summer. All of them are enrolled in a large, urban school district. Many are at risk for poor school achievement and dropping out, with a GPA of one student as low as .88 (on a 4.0 scale), and a few receive special education services. Some (approximately a dozen), however, are high-achieving students and five have been identified as gifted and take AP classes. It is important to note that many of the low-achieving students are very capable of performing at higher levels, and I believe that a

few of them could have been identified as gifted had their earlier years been different.

This article focuses on *all* of these young men, both high and low achievers, both engaged and disengaged. No assumption is made that the high achievers will stay engaged and continue to achieve high grades. And, keeping in mind the students who dropped out of school discussed above (Bridgeland et al., 2006), I am mindful of the importance of supporting those who currently experience school success. This article is based on the belief that underachievement among Black and Hispanic males is influenced by their identities as a student, specifically, their scholar identity. A scholar identity is not just about grades and performance; it also is about attitudes regarding school and achievement and the decisions students make. Next, I describe the components of a scholar identity and set forth three propositions. Three final important assumptions underlie the Scholar Identity Model and Institute: (1) Black and Hispanic males are more likely to achieve academically when they have a scholar identity; (2) Black and Hispanic males are more likely to be viewed as possessing the potential for giftedness if they achieve at higher levels; and (3) these males are more likely to reach their potential when we hold high expectations of them.

Components of the Scholar Identity Model and Institute

As already noted, Black and Hispanic males represent two student groups that have been overlooked frequently for gifted education referral, screening, and placement. What can educators do to redress the situation? What can educators do to develop or

enhance and nurture a scholar identity among these male students?

I define a “scholar identity” as one in which individuals view themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent (Whiting, 2006). Bringing more than two decades of personal and professional experience to the discussion and this body of work, I have found several characteristics, in research and in real settings, that contribute to what I call a scholar identity. Each construct of the Scholar Identity Model (SIM) is grounded in theory (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Cross & Vandiver, 2001; McClelland, 1961; Rotter, 1966; Schubert, 1998). This discussion of the SIM begins with self-efficacy, which lays the foundation for other components of the SIM.

Self-Efficacy

Diverse males who have a scholar identity believe in themselves and their abilities and skills as learners; they are resilient, have self-confidence, self-control, and a sense of self-responsibility. While recognizing their shortcomings or weaknesses they, nonetheless, believe themselves to be capable students. When self-efficacy is high, students like Darnel would be more likely to repudiate negative stereotypes about Black and Hispanic males, refusing to fall prey to them. They are not detracted by challenges or setbacks because they have personal faith; they welcome academic challenges (Bandura, 1977). Sadly, Darnel is more likely to say “I can’t” rather than “I can.”

Future Orientation

Motivation theories indicate that people who have academic aspirations tend to stay focused, to make education a high priority, and to prepare

for success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Grantham, 1994). They think about the past, present, and future, particularly regarding how one’s past and current behaviors and decisions influence future achievements. Diverse males with orientations that are forward thinking are not overly concerned about immediate gratification or short-term interests and goals. These students think about the big picture and set realistic goals. They recognize the importance of a high GPA, excellent school attendance, and participating in challenging courses in reaching their dreams. Without goals and a sense of the future, Darnel will likely continue to make poor choices, narrowing his options to that which is immediate and short term.

Willing to Make Sacrifices

Many successful adults have learned through experiences and trials and tribulations that sacrifices are a necessary “evil” for reaching both short-term and long-term goals. “No pain, no gain” is their mantra. Darnel and other diverse males who have a scholar identity also understand how both personal and social sacrifices are necessary in the long run. Therefore, they are more likely to let go of some aspects of a social life (e.g., parties, joining a fraternity, dating, popularity, and so forth) and other potential distractions (e.g., TV) to reach desired goals. Darnel, at this point, is not willing to make sacrifices, especially social ones.

Internal Locus of Control

Diverse males who have an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) are optimistic; they believe they can do well because they work hard, study, and complete school assignments. When facing poor grades or failure, Darnel would not ask for help. Essentially, Black and Hispanic males

with an internal locus of control are less likely to blame low achievement, failure, or mistakes on their teachers, families, or peers. In essence, they are likely to accept personal responsibility for not just successes, but also failures. Darnel displays the opposite characteristics, often externalizing his failures and not taking responsibility for his decisions and actions.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is an honest appraisal and understanding of one’s strengths and limitations (Schubert, 1998). For those with high self-awareness, weaknesses do not distract them from believing in themselves. Black and Hispanic males are able to adapt, cope, and find ways to compensate for their weaknesses (e.g., they seek a tutor in classes where they are not doing well, they study longer and more often, they work with others). Darnel needs to be self-reflective and acknowledge his weaknesses, but not let them deter him from self-improvement and achievement.

Strong Need for Achievement

To be successful, the need for achievement must be greater/stronger than the need for affiliation (McClelland, 1961). Thus, their pride and sense of worth are not determined by the number of friends they have or their popularity. Although Black males may be social or extraverted, and want to have (many) friends, they are not concerned about being popular for the sake of popularity. Black and Hispanic males, including Darnel, without a strong need for achievement must come to understand that high academic achievement carries much weight. Therefore, learning gets the higher priority.

Academic Self-Confidence

Diverse males with academic self-confidence believe they are capable students. They feel comfortable and confident in academic settings (Hrabrowski, 1998). They do not see any reason to negate, deny, or minimize their academic abilities and skills. These males have a strong work ethic—they spend time doing schoolwork, studying, and pushing themselves. Ultimately, it is important that Darnel and those with a high academic self-concept understand that effort is just as important, or more important, than the ability to be successful. These students recognize that ability without effort is a waste of gifts and talents.

Race Pride

Racial identity (another type of self-perception) influences students' achievement and motivation (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). For Black males who embody the SIM, race has high salience; they are comfortable being in their skin (race/culture). They want greater self-understanding as a racial being, but also are aware of the importance of adapting to their environment and being bicultural (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Just as important, they do not equate achievement with “acting White” or “selling out” (Ferguson, 2001; Ford, 1996; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Fordham, 1988). They refuse to be inhibited by social injustices based on gender, socioeconomic status, and race or ethnicity. Darnel must have opportunities to examine his racial pride and to improve in his racial identity.

Masculinity

Masculinity is a sensitive and controversial topic. Here, I am referring to the notion that Black and Hispanic

males with a scholar identity do not equate being intelligent or studious or talented with being “feminine” or “unmanly.” Instead, these diverse males believe that males are intelligent and that being gifted or intelligent does not subtract from their sense of masculinity or self-worth in any way. When masculinity is high, Darnel and other diverse males are proud to be a scholar.

Summary and Conclusion

The reality that many Black and Hispanic males are not doing well in school settings is a tragedy that cannot and must not be ignored or downplayed. School success has been elusive to a large number of these diverse males. Even in gifted education, these two groups are underidentified and underserved. For this very reason, the Scholar Identity Model and Institute were designed with diverse males in mind. Grounded in experience, research, and theory, these both seek to fill a void in the lives of Darnel and other diverse males by instilling or enhancing their academic identities. The basic goal is to change their academic self-perceptions and their attitudes about learning and success.

Like Darnel, apathy, misbehavior, and underachievement are all too typical of Black males caught in a vicious cycle of underachievement. How does a diverse male come to have positive and strong racial pride? How do we get them to be persistent and resilient in the face of negative stereotypes? How do we change the attitudes of Darnel and other diverse males about being intelligent, about school, and about their scholar identity? I hope the Scholar Identity Model and Institute play a role in helping diverse males choose achievement, set goals, value their intelligence, make sacrifices, participate in gifted and AP classes and, of course, succeed in educational settings. **GCT**

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Author's Note

It is with gratitude that someone of Donna Ford's accomplishment allows a junior scholar like myself to contribute in her place for her multicultural column.