

African American Men, Identity, and Participation in Adult Basic Education and Literacy Programs¹

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Key Findings

Although the national graduation rate for African American males is only 47% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010), few studies have explored their experiences in adult basic and literacy education (ABEL) programs. This study draws on prior research to explore the relationship between literacy and identity and its potential for illuminating African American men's participation in ABEL Programs. The findings indicate that negative early schooling experiences and the social and historical context in which African American men live shape how they perceive and engage with literacy. Non-participation and inconsistent attendance in ABEL programs do not necessarily indicate that these men do not want to learn; rather, they may signify resistance to an alienating environment. In addition, literacy is viewed in light of its benefit to their current circumstances, not as an inherent value. Consequently, understanding African American men's daily lived experiences can challenge negative stereotypes and provide opportunities for learning.

Key Implications

A key tenet of adult education is that learners' experiences are resources for learning. Hence, adult educators must employ a culturally relevant pedagogy that considers the realities of African American men's daily lives. Second, because our perceptions shape how we interact with others, program staff must adopt a critical reflexive practice (Sheared, 1999) that questions their assumptions about who adult learners are and how they are encouraged to participate. Third, knowledge of adult learners' negative early schooling experiences can enable adult educators to help students create counter-narratives through positive learning experiences that envision success and the accomplishment of goals. Finally, adult education programs need to assess their effectiveness in light of the increasing presence of youth in a system that is primarily geared to older adults.

Introduction

The importance of a learner-centered approach to teaching is widely espoused by adult educators. However, adult learners' educational, cultural, and social experiences are often excluded from both research and practice. In a review of adult education programs, Wiklund and colleagues (1992) found that beyond funding needs, a narrow research agenda and a disconnect between the goals and values of program providers and participants inhibited the quality of service provision. In addition, the generic view of adult learners held by many adult educators obscures the experiences of learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Imel, Brockett, & James, 2000), thereby excluding their voices and identities from research, instruction, and program planning. This suggests that the exclusion of African American male experiences may hinder a program's ability to effectively meet their needs. To that end, this study reviewed prior research on (a) literacy and identity and (b) African American male academic achievement, and used these studies to identify implications for Black men's engagement in ABEL programs.

Literacy and Identity

This study views literacy as a social practice that involves not only the cognitive functions of reading and writing but also "values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships," including "people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, [and] how people talk about and make sense of literacy" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). Adult learners acquire literacy as a means of negating, confirming, or transitioning toward particular identities (Denny, 1992). For example, a participant in Denny's study joined the program because he wanted to be seen as an achiever by his

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children. Adult approaches to literacy are also culturally and experientially framed (Gadsden, 1993), meaning that learners gauge the benefits of literacy in light of its effects on their daily lived experiences. The assumption that the benefits of literacy are the same for everyone ignores the social and economic barriers that produce varied outcomes (Graff, 1995).

Identity is an influential factor in adult literacy program participation. It includes personal characteristics and social group affiliations that shape values, norms, and beliefs, and is enacted as a “combination of thinking, feeling, doing, talking and belonging” (Wenger, 1998, p. 56). This study employs a constructivist view of identity (Gee, 2008), which means that the way we are recognized by others shapes how we view ourselves and is revealed and fostered in everyday practices and interactions. In addition, this view frames identities as a combination of past and present experiences and future aspirations that constantly evolve as we encounter new ways of viewing and interacting with the world around us.

Research demonstrates that identities are shaped by the social and cultural theories and practices within a given environment as well as the experiences that negate or affirm those identities (Ferguson, 2000). Because of cultural differences and the impact of racism on educational access and opportunities, African American men’s educational experiences and values cannot be subsumed under White male categories (Hunter & Davis, 1994). Historically, African Americans have struggled against the detrimental effects of negative stereotyping and cultural devaluation in schools and society. For many adolescents, especially boys, this has resulted in alienation, disaffection with schooling, and high dropout rates.

When African American men and youth return to study for their GED diploma, they must also counter societal assumptions that associate low literacy with poverty, poor motivation, limited intelligence, laziness, and an unwillingness to learn. How African American men perceive themselves and are perceived by others is moderated by power relationships that greatly influence their interactions with teachers and staff and their expectations for program participation and outcomes (Gee, 2000-2001). Accordingly, early schooling experiences not only influence adults’ willingness to enroll in ABEL programs (Quigley, 1992), but also mediate how they engage in classroom practices (Belzer, 2004; Rogers, 2004). For example, if a student learns from early schooling experiences that they have deficient capabilities, the student will carry that sense of inadequacy into ABEL programs, limiting their chances of success.

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African American Men in Adult Basic Education and Literacy Research

The few empirical studies of African American men’s experiences in ABEL have primarily focused on their reasons for participation or the lack thereof. In a study of low-literate adults in Pittsburgh, Quigley (1992) found that participants made a conscious decision not to attend ABEL programs because of unpleasant schooling experiences, yet firmly believed in their children’s need to acquire education. Similarly, Denny’s (1992) study with current and prospective adult learners in New York showed that men were more likely than women to recount negative schooling experiences, feelings of shame, and the belief that literacy provided fewer benefits for Blacks than for Whites.

More recently, Rogers (2004) has shown that the negative literate identities that African American men and women formed in early schooling experiences transferred to ABEL settings. In contrast, the same participants exhibited confidence, adequacy and agency in using literacy skills in work, home, and community domains. However, helping students to experience accomplishments serves to negate their sense of inadequacy about learning and increase their confidence in their ability to achieve their goals, thereby promoting their success in ABEL (Rogers & Fuller, 2007).

These studies convey that literacy learning entails more than reading and writing skills; rather, it is underpinned by beliefs and values that shape learners’ identities and actions. Dislike for school is a common finding in the participation research. However, by failing to understand the social and institutional factors that contribute to some African American men’s dislike for school, such as negative stereotyping and a curriculum that disregards their daily lived experiences, adult educators may unintentionally perpetuate similar circumstances in their programs.

The Influence of Sociohistorical Factors

Research on African American males and academic achievement in K-12 education suggests that we must attend to the following issues to understand the relationship between African American men and literacy: (1) the impact of a pathologized African American male

identity in the public sphere and the school system; (2) the legacies of slavery and racism; and (3) the distinct educational experiences produced by the intersection of race, class, and gender.

African American males are stereotyped as lazy, unintelligent, violent, and “at risk” of succumbing to various destructive trajectories (Ferguson, 2000; Jackson, 2006). These stereotypes adversely—and often unconsciously—influence student-teacher relationships and school policies, resulting in a disproportionate occurrence of detentions, suspensions, and special education assignments (Ferguson, 2000). Furthermore, the lack of a culturally relevant pedagogy promotes disaffection with schooling through the devaluation and disregard for African American culture, history, and life experiences (Tatum, 2006).

While recognizing that other factors contribute to early school leaving, some scholars argue that Black students utilize protective or oppositional behaviors such as recalcitrance to counteract attacks on their identity, often leading to dropout (Fordham, 1996). However, there is great controversy as to whether this “oppositional culture” model (Ogbu, 1989, p. 106) adequately explains African Americans’ educational trajectories (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998) and whether the racial gap in educational achievement and attainment results from a rejection of “acting white” (Fordham, 1996, p. 22), a low appreciation of the benefits of academic achievement (Ogbu, 1992), a political response to the treatment and devaluation of students’ identities and culture (Lundy, 2003), or students’ exclusion from “the material conditions that foster the development of skills, habits, and styles rewarded by teachers” (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998, p. 551).

Adult learners bring their academic biographies into the ABEL setting. Adult educators can mitigate any sense of alienation through a culturally relevant pedagogy (Sheared, 1999) and an understanding that, especially for the young adults, African American males must negotiate between two ways of being: school and community.

Lower rates of achievement and attainment have contributed to perceptions that African Americans do not value education, despite evidence to the contrary (Gadsden, 1993). In a longitudinal study of 25 African Americans spanning four generations, Gadsden found that although they valued literacy as an individual and community possession, they also framed it within the context of the African American experience. Their views of literacy and education were based upon the benefits these were believed to confer. In short, African

American learners’ struggles with literacy do not mean they devalue education, but that inequitable material conditions (e.g., residential segregation, access to jobs) may inhibit literacy learning and its expected benefits. Indeed, the sociohistorical relationship between African Americans and literacy has been fraught with the ongoing struggle for equal education and comparable benefits of education. For instance, by the age of 50, 73% of African American men with 12 or more years of schooling experience poverty during adulthood, compared to 29% of their White counterparts (Rank, 2004, p. 98).

The nature of race relations in the United States and cultural differences indicate that African American men’s experiences cannot be captured under White male generalizations. For instance, the hegemonic conception of masculinity emphasizes employment and being a good provider (Hunter & Davis, 1994), yet the promulgation of negative stereotyping and limited employment opportunities hamper African American men’s ability to attain these masculine ideals. Jackson (2006) also argues that African American masculinities depend on maintaining the integrity of cultural identity in a society that is hostile to its manifestations. Ferguson (2000), for example, found that cultural identity was primary among Black low-SES high school students. Thus, in environments where success means adopting different ways of being, students may struggle with the possibility of being excluded from their social networks. A supportive adult education environment depends on recognition of how these and other social and historical factors mold the identities and educational experiences of Black men.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

African American men’s engagement with literacy and the purposes for which they acquire it are informed by their lived experiences of race, class, and gender. Their responses are in opposition to negative stereotyping and policies and practices that devalue their history, culture, and values rather than resistance to learning per se. In addition, pursuit of education may involve creating new identities, possibly reconfiguring their social networks. Furthermore, the daily reality of limited resources thwarts the realization of the desires and goals associated with literacy. By including African American men’s experiences, educators can design more culturally responsive

programs and curricula, thereby increasing and sustaining the participation of African American males.

Specifically, adult educators can support African American men's participation and engagement in ABEL programs by:

- allowing students to share in curricular decisions such as choosing texts that have meaning for them;
- including African American authors, experiences, and history in the curriculum;
- establishing a dialogic environment where teachers and students learn from each other and value each other's experiences;
- making connections between academic texts and learner experiences; and
- connecting learners to resources that will help them envision and reach their goals.

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