

# Commentary

## Countering the Narrative: A Layered Perspective on Supporting Black Males in Education

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The challenges facing Black males throughout the educational pipeline have been discussed by researchers in detail. However, missing from this research are discussions from the perspective of researchers, educators, and community members united on how to better support Black males. The purpose of this reflective piece is twofold. First, we address and contextualize the issues that Black boys and men face and have to overcome in academic and community settings from our various perspectives serving as a teacher candidate, in-service teacher, and higher education professionals. Second we provide recommendations for education stakeholders to help support Black males from our various perspectives.

As educators working and teaching in schools and institutions of higher education, we are bombarded with deficit discourse about Black boys in educational settings and society. While there have been more conversations and increases in targeted initiatives (e.g., *My Brother's Keeper*) aimed at supporting educational outcomes for Black males, the results still remain the same—Black males are at the bottom of all levels of achievement (Harris & Marsh, 2010; Shockley, 2011).

Far too often, the conversation about Black males stops at the alarming statistics of their failure. Unfortunately, there are not more efforts to highlight those Black males who overcome these odds (Goings, 2015). Additionally, when discussing Black males, we do not often hear the perspectives of stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, and community members, who play a significant role in their daily academic and social development. We argue that in order to understand the challenges Black boys and men face and overcome, we must approach the issue from multiple perspectives, uncovering the roles which various stakeholders can play in the success of Black males. Through this lens, we can develop more comprehensive and asset-based solutions to support Black males in their pursuit of educational excellence (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006).

The purpose of this reflective piece is twofold: (1) to address and contextualize the issues Black boys and men face and have to overcome in academic and community settings from our perspectives as a teacher candidate, in-service teacher, and higher education professionals; and (2) to provide recommendations, from our perspectives, for education stakeholders to support Black males. While each of the narratives that follow is rooted in the voice of an individual author, we all collaborated and provided insight into the development of these reflections.

### **The Disconnect Between Theory and Practice: The Teacher Candidate Perspective (Tanneshala)**

As a Black female teacher candidate who is studying to become an elementary educator, I have the privilege of learning pedagogical theory while simultaneously observing teacher-student interactions in classrooms. I have noticed that throughout my teacher preparation program, there has been no preparation on how to reach and teach Black students, specifically males. Disappointingly, this is not an isolated observation; when I talk with friends who have attended other institutions of higher learning, they also express the same sentiment. From my purview, when teacher preparation programs attempt to address the educational experiences of students of color, these conversations are lumped into the category of *urban schooling*. However, urban schooling is very much a loaded term that “usually refers to city schools serving predominantly low-income students, immigrant students, English learners, and students of color” (Quartz, 2012, p. 1). The multi-faceted and diverse experiences of Black males in education, however, cannot be lumped into one term. While there are some similarities, Black males from urban, suburban, and rural areas have many pressing but different needs. Black boys are not a monolithic group, and they deserve careful articulation of their needs, supports, and assets within the context of their community. As a result, as concerned stakeholders we cannot assume we know what is best for Black boys and the communities in which they reside. Rather, we must ask these young men and their families what programs, resources, and supports they need in order to ensure their success. Reaching out in this manner will facilitate buy-in from parents, which can influence the participation of Black boys in various outreach efforts.

Despite the urgency and necessity for teacher preparation programs to address the assets of Black boys in education, there is too often a consistent focus on the deficits of Black boys in these spaces. When there is such a focus on deficits, many of my classmates, who often lack previous interactions with Black boys, become apathetic to the assets they bring to the classroom. It is too often assumed that Black boys are at risk because they are too aggressive, too loud, too violent, too dumb, too hard to control, too streetwise, and too focused on sports (Noguera, 2008) to achieve educational excellence. This connotes the message that they are not worth the time and energy it takes to harness their assets and strengths to prepare them for college and career. My White classmates—and others who have also developed apathy toward teaching and supporting Black boys—often say they do not want to deal with “that problem.”

For many of us who care about the success of Black boys and want to learn how to support them in their pursuit of educational excellence, our textbooks and professors are not always able to provide the tools necessary to effectively teach

and grow this unique group of students. Recently, I asked a faculty member why information on the strengths of Black boys and how to cultivate their success is missing from our teacher preparation program. She responded by stating, “it’s been mentioned several times.” This is disheartening because Black boys and their diverse perspectives and experiences are worth more than just a mention. Teacher prep programs have to do more than just mention the existence of Black boys and their deficits. They have to explore the unique strengths and assets of Black boys, as well as show how to support them in their journey toward college and career. For instance, in classroom management courses, a Eurocentric perspective is presented where an effective classroom is one where students are sitting in their seats and on task. However, Boykin (1992) and others have pointed out the need for teachers to understand the ways in which culture influences the learning of Black children. In particular Boykin asserted the following nine dimensions of Black cultural ethos should be used to guide instruction: (1) spirituality, (2) harmony, (3) movement, (4) verve, (5) affect, (6) expressive individualism, (7) orality, (8) sociality, and (9) communalism (see Strachan, 2015 for a contemporary review of these dimensions and their application in the classroom). As a result, because of the incongruence between the way pre-service teachers are taught to teach and the hyper focus on Black males’ deficits, my teacher preparation perpetuates negative stereotypes, which often influence how teachers perceive and interact with Black boys once they enter the classroom (Noguera, 2008).

### **Recommendation for Pre-Service Teachers**

*For pre-service teachers it is essential that we shift away from deficit thinking about Black males and shift toward an asset-based mindset.*

It is imperative that we, as concerned educators, truly believe every Black boy has the potential for greatness. If we believe the deficit and stereotypical views about Black boys, how can we expect to truly help them? We must change the way we talk about them in mass media, at home, and in schools. We must identify and utilize their strengths and assets in the classroom. Most importantly, in order to utilize the strengths of Black males we have to be open and willing to have conversations with these young men. Being connected to a teacher is an important component to the process of teaching and learning. Throughout my experiences, whenever I have been in a classroom where Black males were thriving, their success was a direct result of a positive mutual relationship between them and their teacher. By changing the way we perceive, talk about, and interact with Black boys in education and in general, we can better promote their academic and social development toward educational and lifelong success. The role of a teacher within a Black boy’s life is important. Teachers have the ability build, motivate, care for, and value Black boys to cultivate their success. The training of these prospective teachers is therefore important in shaping the way we think about Black boys.

*Schools of education should provide pre-service teachers with extensive training on cultural competence and effective pedagogical strategies for Black children (boys specifically).*

To engage Black boys in the classroom, pre-service teachers should have courses that explore education through a cultural lens where students have the opportunity to not only learn about various pedagogical strategies effective for Black boys, but also have the opportunity to work with these young men in an academic setting. The combination of theory and practice is necessary to ensure educators are adequately prepared to meet the needs of their Black male students. Along with this type of partnership, schools of education can use these courses to provide outreach to Black boys and provide opportunities for them to visit the campus and begin to see themselves as college students.

### **Culturally (Un)Responsive Teaching: The Classroom Teacher Perspective (Demetrius)**

I began this academic year mulling over the question, what strategies should I implement to get my Black boys excited about literacy? As a Black male educator, this question is both personal and professional. In the wake of social (in)justices that uncover the burden of being a young, non-affluent Black male in America, I strongly believe teaching literacy might save our Black boys' lives and ensure their future success. While I also believe in the power of Black male educators who build bridges that lead to transformational changes in Black boys' mindsets, I realize it is not likely that the majority of our urban classrooms will have Black males as instructional leads. As an educator, I acknowledge this reality and have to unpack and address other institutional and instructional challenges that our Black boys face within the current urban educational landscape. In my practice as a classroom teacher, it is evident that the largest hurdle Black boys have to overcome is how to succeed in classrooms where instruction is culturally unresponsive.

According to Gay (2010), *culturally responsive teaching* (CRT) entails "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). The recent push for CRT pedagogy hinges on the idea that culture and community are critical components of students' learning experiences. Students are challenged to be able to connect what they learn in school with what they experience in their own cultures and communities. For many of our students, especially Black boys, there is an enormous disconnect between content taught in the classroom and their lived experiences outside of school. This is critical given that culture shapes *how* children understand life and their connection to the world as well as *how* and *what* they learn (Kuykendall, 1989). The important role of the teacher, then, is to facilitate learning opportunities that will bridge that gap. If implemented with fidelity, CRT will produce critically conscious, culturally competent, academically successful students.

Research echoes the power of CRT in improving academic achievement, developing student voice, fostering student engagement, and inciting student motivation (Gay, 2010; Hill, 2012). Because of these gains, CRT has become a standard point of conversation in my school and school district; however, there has not been much discourse that examines the impact culturally unresponsive teaching has on students, particularly Black males.

Contrastingly, culturally unresponsive learning environments foster apathy among Black male students. Kunjufu (1995) argues that Black boys essentially

lose interest in school around the end of elementary school because they have already experienced several years of learning environments that have not effectively engaged and empowered them. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) explain this phenomenon, noting that this disengagement is a byproduct of learning in a culturally unresponsive environment. For Black boys, disengagement, if not addressed, becomes a potential factor that leads to dropout. So then, Black male success in education hinges upon how we address the interconnectedness between culture, engagement, and academic success.

It will take a concerted effort for educators to effectively implement teaching strategies and create learning environments that truly engage the culture of our Black boys. Sadly, however, competing educational priorities often lead to a lack of real cultural engagement, resulting in diluted attempts to reach this underserved segment of our student population. Furthermore, when schools finally make a commitment to provide cultural engagement through instruction, it is often delivered in a superficial and ineffective manner that leads to minimal investment for our Black males. Contrary to popular notions, CRT is more than merely using a rap song to teach the writing process. It requires more than referencing the latest basketball game in a science demonstration and goes beyond using ethnic names in math word problems. Effective CRT in this particular context places the Black male student at the center of the education conversation and asks the question, how can we support him in reaching beyond the learned content so he can make real connections with his culture? It entails empowering student voice, awakening critical consciousness, enabling students to challenge prevailing notions about culture and society, and thereby producing investment that leads to transformational change. If we are going to make incredible gains with our Black males, we have to rethink how we, as educational stakeholders (teachers, administrators, policy makers), address culture in our teaching practices.

### **Recommendations for Classroom Teachers**

*Educators must incorporate the perspectives of Black males in the development of classroom and curricula instruction at all levels.*

Since the teaching profession is dominated by White, middle-class females and most instruction is dictated by the experiences, research, and perspectives of instructors, the multi-faceted perspectives and experiences of Black males are often missing from classroom content, materials, and instruction. To effectively and culturally responsively teach Black males in K–12 schools and institutions of higher learning, we must do a better job of incorporating their perspectives, stories, and contributions into classroom instruction and curriculum through the use of Black literature, research and other resources. For instance, educators can look to the work of Dr. Alfred Tatum and the University of Illinois Research and Remedial Reading Clinic to learn about strategies to engage Black boys with culturally relevant reading materials and strategies to ensure they develop strong literacy skills. Black boys, like their White counterparts, should be able to find affirmative examples of their lived experiences in course content, assessments, and evaluations. In doing so, we, as concerned educators, provide a learning environment that empowers and encourages Black males in their pursuit of educational excellence.

*K-12 and higher education institutions must diversify the teacher/faculty workforce.*

Despite many efforts, the K-12 and higher education workforce lacks racial and ethnic diversity. A more racially and ethnically diverse student body is associated with higher levels of engagement with diverse peers (Bowman, 2012; Saenz, Ngai & Hurtado, 2007; Wells, 2014). Although the benefits that arise from a diverse student body are well-documented, it is less clear how exactly such processes unfold in the classroom (Haslerig et al., 2013). Scholars have found that diversity among the student body alone does not necessarily induce learning benefits. Rather, these benefits are induced when educators activate spaces where diverse viewpoints can be heard so that all students benefit (Haslerig et al., 2013). Racially and ethnically diverse faculty are most equipped to provide students with opportunities for more enlightening, engaging, and interesting classroom discussions and course content, both of which promote better learning outcomes for all students, particularly Black boys. Therefore, we must improve recruitment and retention initiatives to both recruit and retain more racially and ethnically diverse educators, and to train all faculty members to provide a more culturally responsive classroom environment.

### **Raising the Bar: Higher Education Practitioners and Community Member's Perspective (Aaron)**

Not long ago, I was involved in a group conversation with a small group of Black males and other men of color about how to be successful. During this conversation, a Black man in his 20s stated, "I may not be where I want to be yet, but at least I'm not in jail." Other Black colleagues shook their heads in agreement as if to say, "You're right about that."

After a pause, I responded.

"You're right, but it's so sad that we have to say something like that to equate our success based on not being in jail. That shouldn't be where the bar is placed for us. If it is, then that bar is way too low."

Solutions for raising the bar and achieving success for our Black boys may not rest solely in our school systems and homes, but also in our communities.

As a Black male college administrator, I have worked with Black males not only in the educational pipeline, but in the community as well. I am a father of a Black son. As a result, I have not only a moral and ethical obligation to impacting the lives Black boys, I also have a vested interest and deep connection to this issue as I want to impact society's view of Black boys, who walk, talk, and look like my son. One common denominator I have discovered while working with Black boys and men is that those who receive substantial positive reinforcement from their communities, schools, and families develop the foundation to excel in their lives. Research shows that Black males are more likely to graduate when there is parental support and visible models of individuals in their communities who have attained education as a means of upward mobility (Toldson, Harrison, Perine, Carreiro, & Caldwell, 2006). With the appropriate support, these Black men see that success can become a reality. They see that it is not unrealistic or beyond their reach. Unfortunately, too many Black males do not experience this positive reinforcement. Although some overcome the odds through perseverance

and resilience, there are others who have limited coping mechanisms and may consequently engage in maladaptive behaviors.

There are many initiatives being developed to funnel more Black male teachers into our school systems. This is an important step and part of the solution. Having Black male teachers in our school systems can greatly affect the success of our youth. This, however, is not the only way to generate opportunities for learning and growth in our Black youth. An important component for the advancement of Black boys is ensuring that they have opportunities for success in our communities.

There are many community agencies that have Black male leadership that can positively influence our Black boys. Churches, community centers, neighborhoods, and sports teams are just a few of the areas in which the community can positively influence Black youth. In particular, community-based athletic teams often provide Black boys with access to coaches, referees, and organizational leaders who reside within their community. Having exposure to positive examples of Black leadership is crucial for Black boys' academic and social development. Black leaders and role models have a great opportunity to instill positive qualities in our Black boys. Unfortunately, however, many programs have become more about athletic exposure than the development of a solid foundation for our youth. This persistent issue must be addressed.

It is extremely important to ensure that Black leaders develop intentional, positive relationships with Black boys to ensure that they are given the opportunity to reach their highest potential. This potential is rarely realized without proper connection. Teachers create connection when they spend time molding students' minds. Connection can also be created in the community through positive mentorship, but it must be intentional. More specifically, mentorship cannot take a cookie-cutter approach, but should be targeted to each child's specific needs. This is important as Black boys are not a monolithic group. Addressing individuals' specific needs in the mentoring relationship allows the mentor to build a deep connection with the child; in return, the child feels supported by the mentor.

Father figures naturally establish this connection when they are in the home. When parents are actively involved in their Black sons' academic efforts by monitoring homework and other academic pursuits, limiting non-productive activities (e.g., television, radio, and video games), and creating a constant positive dialogue with teachers and school officials, they increase the odds of their sons' success (Mandara, 2006). Unfortunately, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007), nearly 50% of Black children grow up in fatherless homes. Although many Black males can and do succeed in single-parent households, there is also a need for Black communities to support those who may lack a male role model.

Early and positive community interaction with our Black boys is critical to their success. I recall working with a group of teens years ago who was lacking a real connection with a Black male figure. I remember the difficulties I faced with creating a trusting relationship and instilling a sense of hope in the young men. Unfortunately, for many of them, I was too late. They had already lost hope of achieving what they truly wanted. After all they had experienced, high achievement already seemed unattainable because of the low standards society had set for them.

Raising the bar on community relationships is imperative for Black male success, especially when a father figure is absent. The community must be intentional about taking advantage of opportunities to affect Black boys' lives.

If these connections cannot be made within the home or at schools, where most of our youth spend their time, success can still be achieved in our community relationships. The community can help reverse the trends in our educational system. We can no longer settle for mediocre achievement. We must raise the bar.

### **Recommendation for Community Members**

*There must be strategic partnerships between schools, colleges and universities, and community-based programs to support Black males.*

Although educators have direct contact with Black boys in schools, they are not the only caring adults who can have a positive influence. Church leaders, community mentors, athletic coaches, and other Black male leaders can also form strong, positive relationships. To better foster these bonds, we recommend school districts forge long-lasting partnerships with community-based organizations and programs to support Black boys' academic and social development. For instance, in the city where my university is located, the local police department has developed a sports program that seeks to foster positive interactions between police officials and the local community. Through such programs, students can learn about safety and engage in sports programming. This program also engages schools, encouraging teachers to refer students who they think could benefit from the mentorship opportunities the program offers.

Having mentorship opportunities with community members can help bridge the gap between Black boys and the educational, mentorship, and positive reinforcement services they need during their pursuit of educational and lifelong success. As the colloquial saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. When applied to Black boys, it definitely takes a village to change the narrative on how we perceive, talk about, and invest in their future.

### **Conclusion**

We, as concerned Black educators, often read and hear about the problem of Black boys through one myopic, deficit-based lens. This lens is too narrow to capture the multi-layered perspectives of Black boys in education, the supports they need to promote their educational excellence, and the assets and strengths they bring to the classroom. Perhaps this lens is purposeful; perhaps it is used to promulgate a systematic devaluation of Black males in education and society at large. To counter this narrative, we must challenge these dominant discourses and supplant deficit lenses with asset-based ones. In doing so, we believe educators will become better equipped to develop supports that will provide environments that promote educational excellence for Black students, particularly Black boys. Through this reflective piece we hope others continue to think strategically and creatively on how we can support the excellence of Black boys.

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