

They (Don't) Care about Education: A Counternarrative on Black Male Students' Responses to Inequitable Schooling

**By Shaun R. Harper
& Charles H. F. Davis III**

Shaun R. Harper is on the faculty of the Graduate School of Education, Africana Studies, and Gender Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he also serves as director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. Charles H. F. Davis III is a Ph.D. student and research assistant in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

The images created of Black men in our society often confine them to environments shaped by drugs, crime, athletics, and academic failure. In education, we have contributed to this negative portrait by the disproportionate amount of research that emphasizes remediation and disadvantage. (Fries-Britt, 1997, p. 65)

Whatever the source, some teachers have unsubstantiated, unquestioned, and inaccurate thoughts and beliefs about Black male students; put simply, these thoughts can be harmful and quite detrimental... Black male students can and do succeed in every type of school across the world. Their success in urban schools is not an exception. (Milner, 2007, p. 245)

Anyone who takes time to read about them could confidently conclude that Black male undergraduates are troubled, their future is bleak, they all do poorly,

They (Don't) Care about Education

and there is little that can be done to reverse longstanding outcomes disparities that render them among the least likely to succeed in college. (Harper, 2009a, pp. 699-700)

Perspectives on Black male hopelessness and underachievement are evidenced by the numerous publications that highlight their educational upbringing in insufficiently resourced and culturally unresponsive K-12 schools (Noguera, 2003; Toldson, 2008); their low rates of high school completion (Lynn et al., 2010; Schott Foundation, 2010); their underpreparedness for the rigors of college-level work (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer & Young, 2009); their patterns of academic and social disengagement, inside and outside the college classroom (Cuyjet, 1997; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006); and their low rates of baccalaureate degree attainment (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Harper, 2006a, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010). Moreover, Black male students across education levels reportedly place considerable effort into being perceived as popular and “cool” by their peers (Osborne, 1999; Stinson, 2006), and prioritize athletic aspirations above academic achievement (Benson, 2000; Harper, 2009b; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997). While many of these issues are indeed quantifiable and much has been written about them, they work together to convey a dominant message in academic and public discourse pertaining to Black male students: they don't care about education.

Kunjufu (1995) noted that Black boys effectively stop caring about school around the end of elementary school. He contended that teachers halt their efforts to nurture and promote achievement among Black males as early as fourth grade, thus inciting apathy and disengagement among those students. In his visits to K-12 classrooms, Kunjufu noticed that White teachers taught in ways that failed to stimulate enthusiasm for learning among Black boys, curricula at most schools were non-Africentric and disproportionately focused on memorization instead of problem solving, and few classrooms were led by Black male teachers. Visiting an average of four schools per week, Kunjufu saw no male teachers in any of the classrooms he assessed during an eight-year period. Instead, “men can usually be found as janitors, physical education teachers, or administrators” (p. 38), he observed.

These explanatory factors for Black male students' disinterest in education have been linked to unfavorable psychological and educational outcomes (Howard, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2008; Milner, 2007; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009), and used to help explain the shortage of Black men who pursue bachelor's degrees in education and subsequently go on to become K-12 teachers (King, 1993; Shaw, 1996). As noted in a 2010 report from the Schott Foundation for Public Education, only 47% of Black male students graduated from high school in 2008 with peers in their entering cohorts. Subsequently, Black men's degree attainment across all levels of postsecondary education remains alarmingly low—especially in comparison to their same-race female counterparts (see Table 1). In addition to within-race educational attainment differences, Black men's representation in graduate and professional schools also lags behind that of their Latino and Asian American male counterparts. For instance, during a 30-year period (1977-2007), Black men

experienced a 109% increase in post-baccalaureate degree attainment, compared to 242% for Latino men and 425% for their Asian-American male counterparts. The comparative rate of increase for Black women was 253%. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2010) indicate that only 1.7% of public school teachers in 2008 were Black men. Again, the cumulative sum of these statistics does much to sustain the dominant narrative that Black men devalue education, especially in comparison to Black women and other male students of color.

In light of all this, little is known about Black male students who graduate from high school, enroll in college, aspire to earn degrees beyond the baccalaureate, and espouse commitments to various career pathways in the field of education (teaching, school administration, education research, the professoriate, education policy, and so forth). What compels these men to care so much about education, despite what is routinely reported in the literature about their gradual disinvestment in schooling and comparatively lower rates of educational attainment? This question was pursued in the study upon which this article is based.

Conceptual Framework

Oppositional culture theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978) is used for conceptual sensemaking in this study. In the late 1970s, anthropologist John U. Ogbu introduced a lens through which to examine and explain macro-level phenomena that shape the relationships between racial minorities and social institutions such as schools and colleges in the United States. Ogbu first identified Black Americans as belonging to a non-dominant group of *castelike* minorities. Such status was explained by their involuntary and permanent citizenship in American society, their history of enslavement and subsequent victimization, and their belief in social mobility via collective (rather than individual) action. These ideals comprise the foundation upon which *oppositional culture theory* is situated.

The theory, in large part, contends that minority students, specifically Blacks, develop an oppositional (or resistant) stance to dominant cultural spaces (e.g.,

Table 1
Black Students' Postsecondary Degree Attainment by Level and Sex, 2008

	Men %	Women %
Associate's	31.4	68.6
Bachelor's	34.3	65.7
Master's	28.2	71.8
First Professional ¹	37.3	62.7
Doctoral ²	33.6	66.4

¹ For example, J.D., M.D., and D.D.S. degrees

² Only Ph.D., Ed.D., and comparable doctoral degrees

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2010)

They (Don't) Care about Education

schools) in which whiteness is cyclically rewarded and people of color are routinely subordinated. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) attributed this resistance to the historical relationships between White and Black Americans in economic, political, social, and educational domains. Seeing their White peers benefit from unearned privilege and advance unfairly in society reportedly engenders among Black students an opposition to and devaluation of school achievement. Accordingly, Blacks experience schools as social institutions that reinscribe hegemonic power structures, and they therefore resist academic success in an effort to protect a collective cultural identity. The most popular aspect of the theory is Fordham and Ogbu's "acting White" hypothesis, which suggested that Black students deliberately underperform in school to avoid being criticized by their same-race peers for acting like White people.

Fordham and Ogbu explained the origins of Black students' cultural disposition toward school and collective disbelief in the equitable value supposedly associated with education:

[It] evolved during many generations when White Americans insisted that minorities were incapable of academic success, denied them the opportunity to succeed academically, and did not reward them adequately when they succeeded. The perception of schooling as a subtractive process causes subordinate minorities to 'oppose' or 'resist' academic striving. (p. 183)

They further posited that Black students are unlikely to invest in something they see as being most appropriate for and characteristic of White Americans. In sum, the theory presupposes that Black students perceive fewer returns on educational investments; they display greater resistance to school; high-achievers are sanctioned by peers and accused of "acting White"; and resistance to school accounts for racial gaps in achievement.

A number of scholars (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Akom, 2003; Foley, 1991; Harris 2006, 2008) have critiqued oppositional culture theory in general, while others have specifically countered the acting White hypothesis (e.g., Carter, 2005; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Ferguson, 2001; Harper, 2006b; Spencer, Noll, Stolfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Recent sociological studies suggest low performance among Black students is more related to the underdevelopment of prior educational skills (i.e., literacy and numeracy), rather than an intentional opposition to education (Harris & Robinson, 2007). In addition, Harris (2006) argued that not only is oppositional culture not the reason for low-performance among Black students but that beliefs regarding social equity via education is actually high among them—that is, those in the longitudinal study upon which his research is based actually believed that one could transcend poverty and social disadvantage through high rates of educational attainment. Harris's scholarship is central to our reframing of discourse concerning Black male students who have often been regarded as opponents to structures and systems of education.

Methodology and Methods

This article is based primarily on a systematic content analysis of essays written by 304 Black male undergraduates attending colleges and universities across the United States. Each applied to participate in the University of Pennsylvania's Grad Prep Academy, an initiative for college juniors who aspire to earn Ph.D.s in the field of education. Applicants wrote up to 650 words in response to these essay prompts:

- What are your intellectual interests and long-term career aspirations relative to education, and how were they developed?
- If you had a Ph.D. in education, what would you do in response to the educational problems or social phenomena that concern you most?

Data from an in-person focus group interview with the 10 Black male students who were ultimately selected for participation in the Academy are also reported in this article. The following research question is explored herein: What compels Black male students to care so much about education, despite what is consistently reported in the literature regarding their gradual disinvestment in schooling?

Methodological Approach

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) introduce counternarratives as a useful approach to education research. They define this as a method of telling the stories of people who are often overlooked in the literature, and as a means by which to examine, critique, and counter majoritarian stories (or master narratives) composed about people of color. Master narratives are dominant accounts that are often generally accepted as universal truths about particular groups (e.g., Black guys don't care about education)—such scripts usually caricature these groups in negative ways. Solórzano and Yosso note that research and theoretical models that seek to explain outcomes inequities and achievement differences in education often support majoritarian viewpoints through the constant amplification of deficits. As such, a counternarrative “exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color. Although social scientists tell stories under the guise of ‘objective’ research, these stories actually uphold deficit, racialized notions about people of color” (p. 23).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identified three different types of counternarratives: personal stories, other people's stories, and composite stories. We employ the second type in this article. Specifically, we use data to tell stories of Black male students' educational histories, philosophies, and goals, with the ultimate aim of disrupting master narratives concerning their responses to inequitable schooling and their supposed disinvestment in education.

They (Don't) Care about Education

The Academy

In July 2009, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE) sought to identify undergraduates who were entering their junior year for participation in the School's newly-created Grad Prep Academy. The initiative began with an all-expense paid visit to Philadelphia for the students who were ultimately selected. Penn GSE also paid for Academy participants to take a three-month Kaplan course valued at \$1,200 to prepare for the Graduate Record Exam. Additionally, each Academy participant was paired with a Ph.D. student in education who mentored him through the graduate school application process, offered feedback on essays and other application materials, and advised his selection of doctoral programs. Lastly, Academy Scholars who applied for admission to a Ph.D. program at Penn GSE received fee waivers.

Applications were invited from college juniors across all majors, not just education. However, only those who articulated career and intellectual interests that were somehow related to education were encouraged to apply. Because a master's degree is not required for admission to Ph.D. programs at Penn GSE, the Academy's ongoing aim is to enroll as many participants as possible in doctoral programs the semester after completion of their bachelor's degrees. Academy participation in no way guarantees eventual admission to the University of Pennsylvania. If not at Penn GSE, a more important goal is for every Academy Scholar to enroll in an education graduate degree program at a research university immediately after graduating from college.

Sample Description

During a six-week period, a total of 304 applications were received from Black men attending 209 different colleges and universities across the United States (see Table 2). Additionally, 4,492 e-mail inquiries were sent to the Academy's Director in the first year of the initiative. Ten Black male scholars were chosen for the inaugural cohort. As shown in Table 3, seven attended predominantly White research universities and three were students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Only one was pursuing his bachelor's degree in education; the others represented fields ranging from sociology, history, political science, and philosophy to industrial engineering. Despite the size of the inaugural cohort, there was considerable diversity within it (e.g., socioeconomic backgrounds, types of K-12 school attended, and family structures).

Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, this article is based largely on the 304 essays written by Black male undergraduates who applied for participation in the first cohort of Penn GSE's Grad Prep Academy. Consistent with data analysis techniques prescribed by Miles and Huberman (1994), a three-person research team first read a subset of the essays to develop a preliminary list of code words that captured concepts,

statements, and trends reflected across the documents. A series of code comparison meetings were held to compose a codebook and establish interrater reliability. The initial codebook included 89 code words. All 304 application essays were subsequently imported into NVivo®, a qualitative research data analysis software program. Members of the research team coded each participant’s essay line-by-line. Some codes were occasionally discarded, while others (fewer than five) were reconceptualized as the substance of their meanings became more apparent. All modifications to the coding scheme were discussed and agreed upon by all three analysts. At the end of the coding process, code reports were printed and clustered into 41 salient codes, which were later sorted into six categorical themes. Half of those themes are reported in this article, as they build upon each other in various ways to counter the dominant narrative concerning Black men’s disinvestment in education.

In addition to analyzing essays from the 304 Black male applicants, a two-hour focus group interview was conducted with the 10 Academy Scholars during their on-campus visit to Penn GSE. The primary purpose of the interview was to corroborate written perspectives from the essays with Black men’s collective viewpoints on pressing problems in American education. Secondly, the research team sought to better understand how these particular students’ philosophies on

Table 2
Participant Demographics, Overall Applicant Pool

		N
Applicant Pool Characteristics	Total Applicants	320 ^a
	Mean Undergraduate GPA	3.13
	Undergraduate GPA Range	2.05 -4.00
Undergraduate Institution Types	Community Colleges	8
	Historically Black Colleges & Universities	84
	Liberal Arts and Small Private Colleges	46
	Public Baccalaureate/Master’s Universities	39
	Public Research Universities	84
	Private For-Profit Institutions	4
	Private Research Universities	48
	Other	7
Undergraduate Majors	Business	35
	Education	36
	Humanities	72
	Journalism, Media & Communications	26
	Life, Physical, Technical & Natural Sciences	28
	Mathematics	13
	Social & Behavioral Sciences	99
	Other	11

^a Some women and students from other racial groups (n= 16) applied for participation in the Academy. Analyses in this article are based exclusively on the 304 Black male applicants.

They (Don't) Care about Education

education were shaped, why they appeared to be so invested in education systems that were consistently criticized by them and others in the applicant pool, and how they reconciled career commitments to education alongside prior encounters with inequitable schooling (either firsthand or observed). The focus group interview was digitally recorded, professionally transcribed, imported into NVivo, and analyzed using codes that emerged from the essay analysis.

Limitations

This study is based largely on 650-word essays written by students with whom the research team had no face-to-face interaction. Analytical use of these essays, unfortunately, did not afford opportunities to probe for elaboration and clarification, which are important aspects of the qualitative interpretation process. While meaningful themes emerged from a systematic and rigorous coding process, richer data likely would have been gathered from some form of interviews with the 294 Black men who wrote essays but were not ultimately selected for the inaugural

Table 3
Participant Demographics, Academy Scholars

		N
Selected Academy Scholars		10
Mean High School GPA		3.70
High School Type	Predominantly Black Public	4
	Predominantly White Public	2
	Diverse/Racially Mixed Public	4
Mean Undergraduate GPA		3.26
Family Structure	Single Parent	4
	Two Parent	5
	Other	1
Socioeconomic Background	Low Income	4
	Working Class	4
	Middle Class	2
Undergraduate Institution	Brown University	
	Howard University	
	University of Florida	
	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	
	Johns Hopkins University	
	University of Kansas	
	Morehouse College	
	Morgan State University	
	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	
	University of Oklahoma	

cohort. In addition, some scholars might argue that conclusions offered in this article are flawed or inherently lopsided because analyses are based on a sample of applicants to a competitive program. In many respects, that anticipated critique is the exact point of the article—there are Black men who care enough about education to apply for a program that would prepare them for doctoral study and subsequent careers in K-12 school systems, postsecondary contexts, and education policy. If Black men were collectively disinterested in education, there would have been few (if any) inquiries about or applications to the Academy.

Lastly, as Fordham (2008) and Ogbu (2004) argued, their 1986 theory was intended for interpretations of Black students' collective responses within cultural contexts, not for analyses of individual students. Notwithstanding this clarification, several outright claims about the oppositional attitudes and behaviors of individual students were made in the original article. It seems reasonable to argue that several of the 304 men upon whom this study is based had past and present educational encounters that were situated in culture-sharing contexts with other Black students. Furthermore, now 25 years after its publication, "the theory that Blacks resist schooling has been embraced by educators and the general public and is practically regarded as common sense" (Harris, 2006, p. 799). Hence, it seemed to be a suitable framework for the construction of a counternarrative pertaining to Black male students' responses to inequitable schooling.

Findings

Presented in this section are three themes that build upon each other to reveal an uncommon perspective on Black male students' encounters with and responses to inequitable schooling: (1) awareness of educational inequities, (2) beliefs in education as the great equalizer, and (3) purposeful pursuits of the Ph.D. in education. Verbatim reflections from the focus group interview and 304 application essays are occasionally used to illuminate these themes.

Our Schools Suck: The Familiarity of Educational Inequity

William, a student attending a college where evidence of espoused commitments to racial diversity was reportedly lacking, began his essay with a reference to Alonso et al.'s (2009) book, *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education*. "Every school I have ever attended (from elementary schools in California to the college where I am currently a junior) has sucked for African Americans." Several other applicants described under-resourced schools they had previously attended, bad teaching they had received, the shortage of same-race male teachers in their educational histories, White teachers' attempts to misplace them in special education programs, discouraging messages from high school guidance counselors, and racism they had more recently encountered at predominantly white colleges and universities. Moreover, they were well-acquainted with the ways by which schools advantaged their White and wealthy peers. For instance, Carl, a student majoring in psychology noted the following:

They (Don't) Care about Education

One educational problem that bothers me most is the unfair distribution of resources to school districts. Firsthand, I saw the effects of attending schools in a district where funding was not as abundant as its more affluent counterparts. This disparity could be seen in nearly every aspect of schooling, from the condition of the textbooks to the abundance of after-school programs.

Many others articulated sophisticated understandings of educational conditions that sustained racial gaps in achievement, representation, and power in America. Some essays included citations of research studies in which widespread and longstanding racial disparities in the context of schooling are reported.

There was also an acute awareness of how education policies in particular have neglected to bring about racial equity. Mauriell, one of the 10 selected Academy Scholars and a student at the University of Illinois, commented: "In the wake of major educational reforms, underrepresented groups have continuously struggled to improve their social status due to inequalities of opportunity and disparities in academic resources." He and others knew that previous policies and reform efforts that were enacted to improve schools—especially for Blacks, other students of color, and lower-income populations—had failed to do so. "*No Child Left Behind* has left many African-American males behind; I could have easily been one of them," another remarked. And in the focus group, Justin, a student at Brown University, elaborated on how problems in urban education are yet to be corrected despite legislative attempts at accountability and federal investments.

A fraction of the applicants aspired to work someday at colleges and universities, either as professors or administrators. Consistent with critiques of K-12 school systems and education policy, these students had experienced postsecondary contexts in which Blacks were underrepresented and underserved. A Drake University student wrote: "I currently attend a somewhat prestigious university with an ethnic make-up of predominately White students, faculty and staff, and what I would presume to be a presence of less than 5% African-American faculty, staff and students combined." Being the only Black male student in all one's classes and having never taken a college course from a Black professor were phenomena about which many applicants wrote.

They were also aware of other postsecondary problems that pertained specifically to Black male students. Julian (Wright State University) and Marcus (University of Akron) acknowledged the retention crisis concerning Black undergraduate men—more than two-thirds who start college do not graduate within six years, which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education (Harper, 2006a). Julian had been repeatedly told this by administrators on his campus, whereas Marcus had encountered these statistics in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. Many others wrote about Black male friends and roommates with whom they entered college but had since dropped out. In sum, the overwhelming majority of Black men who sought membership in the Academy recognized how schools and colleges sustain racial inequity.

In Spite of Inequity: Beliefs in Education as the Great Equalizer

Notwithstanding their awareness of how U.S. institutions persistently disadvantaged them and other Black students, most men in this study espoused a belief in the power of education. “Anything is possible through education” and similar statements appeared most often across the essays. Put differently, the word assigned to such statements in our codebook was most employed in the coding activities. Likewise, “education as the great equalizer” was mentioned 23 times by multiple participants in the focus group interview. Below is an exchange between four Academy Scholars:

Bobby: I think that education is the great equalizer. I feel like if you can get more Black males educated and if you can get more minority people educated in general, then you uplift the whole society because education puts people on an equal playing field.

Demetri: Like Bobby said, education is the great equalizer. For me, if I’m trying to affect the next generation it has to be through education first and foremost. That is the best way to address many of these problems that are institutionalized, permanent, and pervasive. It seems like the most logical way.

Nicholas: The phrase that comes to my mind is Black Liberation Pedagogy. When you think about the concept of liberation, what you’re talking about is people having the agency and consciousness not to have freedom given to them, but they actually have the capability to liberate themselves. I think that’s the reason why all of us believe education is so important. When you’re educated, it opens up your consciousness to a lot of different and new possibilities and allows for Black people to liberate ourselves.

Anthony: Going off something that both Nick and Demetri said—there is a quote that I always try to stand by. It goes like: “education is the primary tool for emancipation and liberation for African Americans in the true fight for equality in this country.” I always keep that in the back of my mind. No matter what we do, the dominant culture, meaning White people, are always going to look at African Americans as if we’re nothing if we aren’t educated.

Beyond the focus group participants, many others had experienced firsthand the liberating effects of education. Jordan described the hardships of his familial and home communities. Accordingly, “education was my ticket out of a life of poverty, drugs, and absent parents.” Others reflected on how different their lives would have been if they had not graduated from high school and enrolled in college. They predicted they would have been captured in a seemingly never-ending cycle of poverty like family members and some of their same-race male peers who had attained lower levels of formal education.

These Black men’s perspectives on the liberating potential of education were usually shaped by their parents and other family members. Quentin, an Academy Scholar from Howard University, indicated that his parents always taught him that

They (Don't) Care about Education

education was the great equalizer in America. Growing up, neither of Quentin's parents were college educated; but at age 46 his mother enrolled in a technical college to obtain an associate's degree. "Her persistence and recognition of the importance of education continues to inspire me." According to Kenneth, "I believe that education is the great equalizer and feel that my interest in understanding the educational, social, and cultural issues of underrepresented students, specifically African-American males, is shaped and influenced by my experiences and my family."

In another essay, an applicant wrote about his grandmother's insistence that he and his siblings attain as much education as possible. Although she possessed little formal education herself, the grandmother helped convince this student that education was "the ONLY pathway to prosperity and deliverance." Similar messages reinforced by their families, despite whatever contradictory evidence they witnessed in school, compelled participants to believe that education was the best route to individual opportunity and collective uplift. Also, their observations of other pathways (e.g., drug trafficking and factory work) suggested to these men that education could afford them a wider array of career options. In one sentence an applicant would describe educational disparities and his lived experiences in schools that remanufactured inequity, yet in the next write persuasively about his belief that education offers an escape from injustice and social subordination.

A Hope in Degrees Unseen: Purposeful Pursuits of the Ph.D.

I truly believed that only White Americans were capable of success. Because of the lack of a high number of Black males in positions of influence, I decided to pursue a career in education and help break down negative stereotypes. Not until I reached my freshman year in college at Florida State University that I actually saw a Black male teacher... this is important for minority students who do not see people like themselves in positive roles.

—Clarence

Those who applied as well as the 10 who were ultimately selected for participation in the Grad Prep Academy thought that attaining the Ph.D. would be an important signifier of educational possibility, and position them to break cycles of poverty and hopelessness that had long plagued generations of family members. Many wrote about how attainment of baccalaureate and doctoral degrees in the field of education would be personally rewarding because they believed so deeply in the value of schooling. But in several instances, their expressed interest in pursuing the Ph.D. was connected to larger social, communal, and familial purposes.

Emerson described a powerful exchange with a family member that confirmed for him how educational attainment could positively inspire others. "While incarcerated, he wrote me a letter that changed my perspective on life: I was astonished to discover that he admired me simply because I had a diploma." Emerson went on to share the following:

To be alive after being born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, one of

Shaun R. Harper & Charles H. F. Davis III

America's murder capitals, is an accomplishment in itself. My early days were dim from all the dark clouds of drugs, violence, and gang activities around me. If people are influenced by their surroundings, the likelihood of me having intellectual interests was implausible, especially in an at-risk environment.

Like several others in this study, he believed his educational attainment would expose people in his neighborhood and family to possibilities beyond present circumstances.

One of the most illustrative perspectives on educational possibility was offered by Marvin, a student at University of California, Riverside:

As an African-American [person], who has been underprivileged, underrepresented, and who has witnessed the failures of an inadequate school system, I want to be one of the many examples that demonstrate that we as a people can overcome socioeconomic barriers and still choose education as our pathway.

Others also predicted that pursuing and ultimately attaining doctorates would confirm for persons from backgrounds similar to theirs that Black men can and do persist to the highest level of education. "I would be the first in my family," appeared in numerous essays and the focus group transcript. Also frequently mentioned was how earning a Ph.D. would likely inspire siblings and younger cousins to do the same. Several essays included firsthand accounts of growing up never having met a Black person who had gone to college or graduate school; applicants felt it was important for Black youth to have greater exposure to such persons. In the focus group, Eugene talked about the shortage of Black male professors in his field. He thought the following was a sensible pathway to addressing the problem: (1) attain his Ph.D. in educational psychology, (2) become a professor of educational psychology, and (3) mentor his Black male students and encourage them to pursue careers in the professoriate.

In the focus group Mauriell commented: "We as Black men can improve our status in education by doing research on these issues and inspiring the next generation to continue the cycle of raising our collective social status through educational attainment." Cycle-breaking was also frequently mentioned in the essays. For example, Jalil was certain that his having graduated from an urban high school and enrolling in college was considered abnormal—he wanted to make transcending urban disadvantage more ordinary. Likewise, Jeremy shared this:

The majority of kids in inner cities do not end up going to college. They get trapped in the situation they are living in. A lot of children in urban communities do not even think that college is an option, because they think it's too expensive, or they do not think they are smart enough to attend college. I would love to have the opportunity to change that. Poverty is a cycle; most [Black] people in urban communities live below the poverty line. All it takes is one individual to break the cycle.

Jeremy believed he could be the individual who engenders a dismantling of the cycle about which he wrote. Furthermore, in the focus group interview, Chauncey,

They (Don't) Care about Education

a student at Morehouse College, spoke about increasing “mental access” to higher education.

I want to get the Ph.D. Obviously I want to be a researcher. But I also want to create access for African-American males to pursue higher education. It isn't just the physical access to institutions, but also the mental access that I want to work on.

Helping others realize the possibilities of higher education was described as important by Chauncey. He believed that pursuing the Ph.D. would be an important and effective way to expand access among other Black persons.

Discussion and Implications

Black men do care about education. Despite their recognition of how schools, postsecondary institutions, and policies unfairly disadvantage them and others in their families and communities, the undergraduates upon whom this article is based maintained a firm belief in the liberating potential of education. This is obviously inconsistent with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) claims that those who forecast inequitable returns on educational investments are likely to resist schooling. Men in this study knew that schools persistently remanufactured inequity, but yet felt empowered to commit their careers to addressing such problems on behalf of other Black persons. They aspired to earn doctorates in education for reasons that were almost always linked to the shortcomings of and possibilities associated with U.S. education. In many ways, theirs was the antithesis of an oppositional stance. Participants clearly maintained what Harris (2008) called “optimism in the face of despair” (p. 608).

Fordham and Ogbu explicitly suggested that Black students are unlikely to invest in something they see as being most appropriate for and characteristic of Whites. This is a perspective worth engaging here. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education (2010), 83.1% of K-12 public school teachers in 2008 were White (more than three-fourths of whom were women). Although Academy applicants were not invited to furnish rosters of former teachers or report racial demographics about them, odds are that many had been taught mostly by White women. In fact, this was often indicated in essays and the focus group, as were reflections on having had few Black male teachers in their educational histories. Hence, it would seem that Black men would view careers in education as being for White women and therefore personally undesirable or inappropriate. This was not the case in the present study, as participants wanted to invest in a system that was overwhelmingly White and persistently unresponsive to Black learners.

As noted in Tables 2 and 3, respectively, 41.3% of the applicants and 70% of the Academy Scholars attended predominantly White research universities. In 2008, White faculty comprised 77.1% of tenured and tenure-track faculty at research universities. By comparison, only 4.7% of tenured and tenure-track faculty at those same institutions were Black. Despite the size of the 259 research universities in the U.S., 42.1% employed 10 or fewer Black male faculty (across all disciplines and ranks). It is therefore unsurprising that several applicants from these and other

predominantly White colleges and universities reported having never taken a course from a same-race professor. They could have easily determined that the professoriate is for Whites and therefore enacted an oppositional stance against career opportunities in the domain of postsecondary education. However, some aspired to become professors for that very reason. While it was not explicitly explored in this study, the students' stated desires to participate in professions that were overwhelmingly White seems to contradict Fordham and Ogbu's 'acting White' hypothesis.

Supposedly, Black students' cultural resistance toward school "evolved during many generations when White Americans insisted that minorities were incapable of academic success, denied them the opportunity to succeed academically, and did not reward them adequately when they succeeded" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183). A counter-perspective on this is apparent in data reported in the previous section of this article. Participants' beliefs in education as the great equalizer were shaped by messages that grandparents, parents, and generations of other family members consistently conveyed to them, their siblings, and their cousins. Despite having been denied equitable educational opportunities themselves, these adult family members socialized young Black men to value school.

An anticipated question that warrants a response is: If Black men care so much about education, then why are their rates of attainment and other achievement indicators so low? Insights into this question have been furnished elsewhere (e.g., Harper, 2009a; Howard, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2008; Lynn et al., 2010; Milner, 2007; Toldson, 2008). Culturally unresponsive curricula, the pervasiveness of deficit perspectives and low teacher expectations, quantifiable disparities in school resources, the shortage of same-race male teachers, racist postsecondary environments, and regressive education policies are but a few explanations offered in the literature. Harris and Robinson (2007) found that Black student underachievement is more related to the underdevelopment of literacy and numeracy rather than an intentional opposition to education. Perhaps if curricula and pedagogy were culturally responsive and more closely aligned with the educational needs of Black male students, they would acquire such skills at more equitable rates. Why would one who is made to believe he is bad at school maintain excitement about education?

This study reveals much else that refutes Fordham and Ogbu's theory, seemingly confirmatory statistical indicators of carelessness, and widely-held public presumptions regarding Black male students' disinvestment in schooling. When provided a narrative space, Black men said they cared deeply about education. On the other hand, most believed that schools did not care about them, a perspective that is consistent with previous research (e.g., Howard, 2008). Necessary is the pursuit of additional narratives from those who can give voice to their educational values, philosophies, and histories. Useless at this point are additional reinforcements of dominant discourse that attributes Black men's underachievement and low rates of educational attainment to a deliberate opposition to schooling—if asked, students themselves are likely to offer an alternative set of perspectives.

Also apparent is that upon prompting, Black male undergraduates from a range

They (Don't) Care about Education

of disciplines are willing to commit their careers to solving pressing problems in education policy and practice. "I didn't know until I heard of this program exactly how to go about getting my Ph.D.," was a sentiment shared by many in this study. Likewise, several who inquired about and applied for participation in the Academy were surprised to discover that career opportunities in the field of education extended beyond K-12 classroom teaching and familiar administrative roles (e.g., principals and superintendents). That only 36 applicants to the Academy were undergraduate education majors makes clear that there are Black men pursuing bachelor's degrees in other disciplines who could be easily recruited to education careers.

More initiatives like the Penn GSE Grad Prep Academy are needed to introduce students who have had few (if any) prior interactions with same-race male teachers, professors, and educational leaders to career possibilities in a field that most view as in need of repair. But how would a political science major, for example, know how to go about doing so if no one helps him see how his interests in politics could be used to inform education policymaking in ways that will positively affect broken schools in his community of origin? The Black male P-12 teacher shortage can be addressed, so too can the diversity of the postsecondary professoriate if more effort were invested into recruiting Black men to careers in education. Those who have been disadvantaged by schools, colleges, and policies could be empowered and recruited to help fix them—many Black men care enough about education and the collective uplift of their communities to make such career commitments.

References

- Ainsworth-Darnell, J. W., & Downey, D. B. (1998). Assessing the oppositional culture explanation for racial/ethnic differences in school performance. *American Sociological Review*, 63(4), 536-553.
- Akom, A. A. (2003). Reexamining resistance as oppositional behavior: The Nation of Islam and the creation of a Black achievement ideology. *Sociology of Education*, 76(1), 305-325.
- Alonso, G., Anderson, N. S., Su, C., & Theoharis, J. (2009). *Our schools suck: Students talk back to a segregated nation on the failures of urban education*. New York: New York University Press.
- Benson, K. F. (2000). Constructing academic inadequacy: African-American athlete's stories of schooling. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(2), 223-246.
- Bonner II F. A., & Bailey, K. W. (2006). Enhancing the academic climate for African-American men. In M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *African-American men in college* (pp. 24-46). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carter, P. L. (2005). *Keepin' it real: School success beyond Black and White*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cook, P. J., & Ludwig, J. (1998). The burden of "acting White": Do Black adolescents disparage academic achievement? In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap* (pp. 375-400). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Cuyjet, M. J. (1997). African-American men on college campuses: Their needs and their perceptions. In M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *Helping African-American men succeed in college*. New Directions for Student Services (No. 80, pp. 5-16). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dancy II, T. E., & Brown II, M. C. (2008). Unintended consequences: African-American male

Shaun R. Harper & Charles H. F. Davis III

- educational attainment and collegiate perceptions after Brown v. Board of Education. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(7), 984-1003.
- Ferguson, R. F. (2001). A diagnostic analysis of Black-White GPA disparities in Shaker Heights, Ohio. *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 2001, 347-414.
- Fordham, S. (2008). Beyond capital high: On dual citizenship and the strange career of "acting White." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 39(3), 227-246.
- Foley, D. E. (1991). Reconsidering anthropological explanations of ethnic school failure. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 22(1), 60-86.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of 'acting White.' *The Urban Review*, 18(3), 176-206.
- Fries-Britt, S. L. (1997). Identifying and supporting gifted African American men. In M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *Helping African-American men succeed in college*. New Directions for Student Services (No. 80, 65-78). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Harper, S. R. (2006a). *Black male students at public universities in the U.S.: Status, trends and implications for policy and practice*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.
- Harper, S. R. (2006b). Peer support for African American male college achievement: Beyond internalized racism and the burden of 'acting White.' *Journal of Men's Studies*, 14(3), 337-358.
- Harper, S. R. (2009a). Niggers no more: A critical race counternarrative on Black male student achievement at predominantly white colleges and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(6), 697-712.
- Harper, S. R. (2009b). Race, interest convergence, and transfer outcomes for Black male student-athletes. In L. S. Hagedorn & D. Horton (Eds.), *Student athletes and athletics*. New Directions for Community Colleges (No. 147, pp. 29-37). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Harper, S. R. (2012). *Black male students in public colleges and universities: A 50-state report card*. Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.
- Harris, A. L. (2006). I (don't) hate school: Revisiting oppositional culture theory of Blacks' resistance to schooling. *Social Forces*, 85(2), 797-833.
- Harris, A. L. (2008). Optimism in the face of despair: Black-white differences in beliefs about school as a means for upward social mobility. *Social Science Quarterly*, 89(3), 608-630.
- Harris, A. L., & Robinson, K. (2007). Schooling behaviors or prior skills? A cautionary tale of omitted variable bias within oppositional culture theory. *Sociology of Education*, 80(2), 139-157.
- Howard, T. C. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in pre K-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 110(5), 954-85.
- Jackson, J. F. L., & Moore III, J. L. (2008). The African-American male crisis in education: A popular media infatuation or needed public policy response? *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(7), 847-853.
- Kimbrough, W. M., & Harper, S. R. (2006). African-American men at historically Black colleges and universities: Different environments, similar challenges. In M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *African-American men in college* (pp. 189-209). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- King, S. H. (1993). The limited presence of African-American teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 63(2), 115-149.
- Kunjufu, J. (1995). *Countering the conspiracy to destroy Black boys*. Chicago: African American Images.
- Lynn, M., Bacon, J. N., Totten, T. L., Bridges III, T. L., & Jennings, M. E. (2010). Examining

They (Don't) Care about Education

- teachers' beliefs about African-American male students in a low-performing high school in an African American school district. *Teachers College Record*, 112(1), 289-330.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Milner IV, H. R. (2007). African-American males in urban schools: No excuses—teach and empower. *Theory Into Practice*, 46(3), 239-246.
- Noguera, P. A. (2003). The trouble with Black boys: The role and influence of environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African-American males. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 431-459.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1978). *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ogbu, J. U. (2004). Collective identity and the burden of “acting White” in Black history, community, and education. *The Urban Review*, 36(1), 1-35.
- Osborne, J. W. (1999). Unraveling underachievement among African-American boys from an identification with academics perspective. *Journal of Negro Education*, 68(4), 555-565.
- Palmer, R. T., Davis, R. J., & Hilton, A. A. (2009). Exploring challenges that threaten to impede the academic success of academically underprepared African-American male collegians at an HBCU. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(4), 429-445.
- Palmer, R. T., & Young E. M. (2009). Determined to succeed: Salient factors that foster academic success for academically unprepared Black males at a Black college. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 10(4), 465-482.
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2010). *Yes we can: The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black males*. Cambridge, MA: Author.
- Sellers, R. M., & Kuperminc, G. (1997). Goal discrepancy in African-American male student-athletes' unrealistic expectations for careers in professional sports. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 23(1), 6-23.
- Shaw, C. C. (1996). The big picture: An inquiry into the motivations of African-American teacher education students to be or not to be teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33(2), 327-354.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.
- Spencer, M. B., Noll, E., Stolfus, J., & Harpalani, V. (2001). Identity and school adjustment: Revisiting the “acting White” assumption. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(1), 21-30.
- Stinson, D. W. (2006). African American male adolescents, schooling (and mathematics): Deficiency, rejection, and achievement. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(4), 477-506.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2010). When race and gender collide: Social and cultural capital's influence on the academic achievement of African-American and Latino males. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33(3), 307-332.
- Toldson, I. A. (2008). *Breaking barriers: Plotting the path to academic success for school-age African-American males*. Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.
- Thomas, D. E., & Stevenson, H. C. (2009). Gender risks and education: The particular classroom challenges for urban low-income African-American boys. *Review of Research in Education*, 33, 160-180.
- Tyson, K., Darity Jr., W., & Castellino, D. R. (2005). It's not “a black thing”: Understanding the burden of acting White and other dilemmas of high achievement. *American Sociological Review*, 70(4), 582-605.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2009*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.