Cultural Assessment Paper:

African American Students in Public Education

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to first identify how young black men are different than other demographic groups. Their cultural identity is a product of the history of segregation and racism, institutionalized racism in school, and endemic poverty. Solutions in both the cultural and structural realms are recommended.

The purpose of this paper is not to make sweeping generalizations about the young black population, which would be inherently biased. However, a strong body of research was assessed to determine the overarching challenges young black males face in the education system and provide research-based solutions.

Research About the Cultural Group

African American males are at the greatest risk of leaving public school amongst all minority groups in the United States. In the last ten years, the gap between black and white male graduations has only decreased by 3% (Holzman, 2012). The 2011 NAEP, which measures national achievement, indicated that only 10% of black males in the 8th grade are proficient in reading and only 52% of black males are graduating from high school while 78% of white males graduate (Hemphill, 2011). These statistics underscore the underachievement of black males and indicate the achievement gap between black and white males is vast. The following states have a graduation rate less than 50% for black males: New Mexico, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, New York, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska (Holzman, 2012). All of these statistics resoundingly indicate that the outcomes for black males have not increased significantly and there are underlying conditions that are contributing to the unacceptably low outcomes for black male students.
One in three black children grow up in poverty, so health, welfare, and education concerns are immense (Noguera, 2003). Noguera states that black boys are involved with the most homicides as both perpetrators and victims of any demographic group in the United States, which illustrates the high incidence of violence. Additionally, children who grow up in poverty are less likely to seek preventive health care. One example of poor health care is developing vision problems at a young age that go untreated. In schools, black men are often diagnosed with reading disabilities, which are simply masking vision problems (Noguera, 2003).

The cultural differences amongst black men manifest negatively in an educational setting. Teacher turnover is a massive problem in low-performing, urban schools. This is a by-product of teacher and school misunderstandings in the cultural complexities of the children they work with. Secondary cultural distinctions are ways that sub-groups differentiate themselves from others like religion, food, and communication styles. A secondary culture distinction for young black men is a disengaged disposition in school (Chandler et al., 2008). Teachers must understand that this is not inherently a sign of non-compliance. Black men are traditionally direct communicators, which is a result of segregation and racism (Chandler et al., 2008). This may present in perceived unprofessional or inappropriate communication in schools.

Black men largely come from households headed by women, they rely heavily on their families, and view education as a gateway to success (Chandler et al., 2008). Noguera conducted a research study in North Carolina that surveyed black men and he found that 90% of black males indicated they had a strong desire to succeed in school. This research indicates that researchers, policy makers, and educators need to reflect on
what systemic and cultural barriers are precluding black men from widespread success in the current form of public education.

**Best Practices for African-American Males**

There is a growing body of research that black males can achieve, but it will require additional supports and modifications at home and in school. There are two primary ways to address the educational needs of black males. The first is to empower black men as active agents in their education. Historical conditions, institutionalized racism, and school expectations have fostered a paradigm where black men are seen as inferior. Second, schools that serve primarily black populations must become more effective: they need a clear sense of purpose, core standards, high expectations, commitment to educate every student, a safe space for students, and strong partnerships with parents and families (Hemphill, 2011).

Noguera describes the Attitude-Achievement Paradox that is prevalent in black male populations. This paradox states that black men are largely motivated to pursue an education, but do not feel like they have the resources necessary to succeed. To change this paradigm, educators first need to understand the attitudes black men bring to school from their families, communities, and past experiences in education. A prevailing attitude amongst black men is that sports and music will provide more upward mobility than education (Noguera, 2003). It is up to educators to expose the immense power and upward mobility of education for young black men.

There is also a popular conception that black men are passive agents in their education. Educators, parents, and key stakeholders must change this view. Institutionalized gender and racial roles form as soon as students start school (Hemphill,
Tracking, a common way to differentiate instruction for students is problematic in relegating black men to the lower echelons of academic performance. Noguera emphasizes the importance of teachers having confidence in all students. This is a particularly difficult challenge to address without systematic reform in schools to ensure there are systems that support the needs of every student. For black men to have an attitude of achievement, educators who interact with students must believe all students can achieve. A 2012 study found that 4 out of 5 black men were left out of an AP subject they had potential to succeed in because their school didn’t offer the class (Holzman, 2012). Class offerings are a resource problem in underfunded schools, which is an institutional failure. In offering more rigorous and varied classes, the Attitude-Achievement paradigm is altered to inculcate the idea that black men can achieve.

Holding students, teachers, and schools accountable for educational outcomes is also crucially important. This includes expectations around standardized testing, but also accountability in terms of modifications and student-centered learning that is aimed to set every student up for success. There are simply not enough effective schools to serve young black men in the United States. Effective is an amorphous term that is difficult to ascribe meaning to. Effective for black men who resoundingly face learning deficits that are a product of their environment and past educational experiences means a student centered approach to education. This is certainly more difficult for teachers and schools to systematize, but it is the process of determining the needs of each student and modifying the curriculum to meet their needs. This could come in the form of Personal Opportunity Plans that include expanded learning opportunities to meet the needs of all
students (Holzman, 2012). These are not IEPs or indications of learning disabilities. Rather, they are a systematic way to ensure the needs of all students are met.

Beyond modifications that can be made in the classroom, literacy is the single greatest challenge black males face in closing the achievement gap. Black males, on average, begin school behind, making gap closure even more difficult (Davis, 2003). The proposed solution is early childhood education funded by the government with the aim of improving literacy levels before primary school beings (Davis, 2003). The literacy levels of 3rd grade males determine the numbers of prisons constructed, which emphasizes the importance of closing the literacy gap before it begins. Literacy skills also decline most rapidly over the summer when black males traditionally do not have educational enrichment opportunities and face “summer slide” (Davis, 2003). Culturally, educators, families, and other stakeholders must work on investment plans to ensure black men have culturally responsive literature they can connect to. Building literacy skills is as much about instruction as investment. Effective schools also leverage partnerships with parents to invest students in the importance of literacy. A multitude of researchers argue that the achievement gap is the literacy gap.

**Conclusion**

Black men face inequities and institutionalized racism that no other demographic group faces as intensely. The prevailing attitude of black men is a byproduct of segregation and racism. To effectively address the educational needs of young black men, educators must work to change the Attitude-Achievement Paradox, hold teachers and schools accountable to ensure Personal Opportunity Plans are written to avoid misdiagnosis of learning disabilities, and create additional early childhood education
opportunities to combat the literacy deficits that black men face. In conjunction with these educational strategies, policy work must be undertaken to combat the redlining that precludes adequate distribution of resources to the most impoverished schools that predominantly serve African Americans.
Works cited


