
FINDING HIGH ABILITY AMONG THE UNDERSERVED

Gifted Black Males: Understanding and Decreasing Barriers to Achievement and Identity

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Black males as a group experience disproportionate amounts of school failure. Compared to Black females and White males, for example, Black males have the highest dropout rates, poorest achievement, and lowest test scores. Further, they are sorely under-represented in gifted education and over-represented in special education. Of those Black males who do succeed in school settings, certain characteristics seem to be evident. In this article, I share these characteristics in what I am calling a *scholar identity* model. First, however, I discuss achievement barriers that many gifted Black males seem to face. The article ends with some recommendations for educators as they work to improve the educational status of Black males identified as gifted.

Keywords: gifted, achievement gap, scholar identity, Black males

National reports overwhelmingly reinforce the well-known and unfortunate reality that Black males face incredible barriers as they strive to achieve in school and social settings. One of the most potent and pervasive barriers is that of social injustices that effectively undermine their potential, self-perception, and opportunity to achieve in academic settings. The toll that is taken on Black males shows up in all economic, social, and academic areas—more than all other males and females; Black males are over-represented in special education, under-represented in gifted education, over-represented among dropouts, over-represented among students who are underachievers, and over-represented among students who are unmotivated and choose to disengage academically (Ferguson, 2001, 2002; Ford, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). These dismal realities hold true at all levels of the educational pipeline, from pre-school to college and they hold true for Black males at all levels of academic ability or skill. In other words, being identified as gifted does not necessarily preempt gifted

Black males from encountering barriers to their achievement. As described throughout this article, like Black males in general, gifted Black males are also at high risk for failing to reach their academic potential.

In the sections that follow, barriers facing gifted Black males are described. In this overview, I rely on the literature on Black males and achievement to set the foundation; from this literature, I draw implications for Black males who are gifted. I also rely extensively on literature focused on gifted Black males; unfortunately, though substantive in content, little has been written about this student group (see works by Fred Bonner, Donna Y. Ford, Tarek Grantham, Asa Hilliard III, and James A. Moore III). This limited body of work, however, consistently indicates that being gifted and high achieving presents another set of barriers for gifted Black males to confront. Thus, a Venn diagram, as presented in Figure 1, is the simple, but appropriate, model used in this article to describe issues facing this population.

Conceptually, the figure indicates that the body of work on gifted males can be used to shed some light, albeit limited, on the issues and needs of gifted Black males; likewise, the body of work on Black males can be useful in explaining the needs and issues of gifted Black males. Too often, however, scholars have not studied or contemplated what it means to be Black *and* gifted *and* male.

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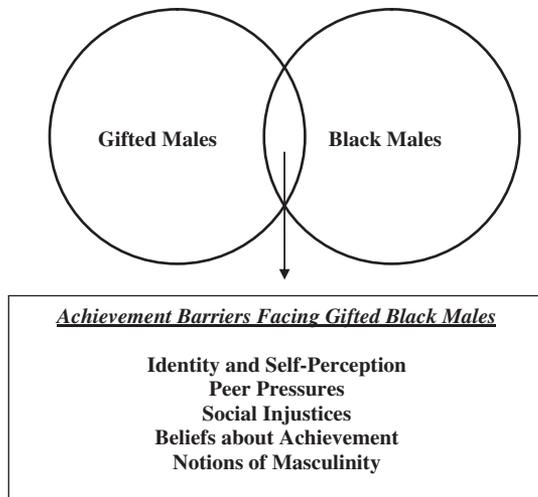


FIGURE 1 Model of achievement barriers facing gifted Black males.

The purpose of this article is to present an overview of the substantive issues affecting gifted Black male achievement; more importantly, the goal is to offer suggestions for change. Change, I argue later, can take place more readily when we instill a scholar identity within gifted Black males and when educators become culturally responsive and empowered.

ACHIEVEMENT BARRIERS FACING BLACK MALES

The educational and social status of Black males in the United States is dismal. The abysmal statistics speak for themselves in the aptly titled report *Facts Contributing to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline* (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). The deplorable and alarming statistics of low achievement and underachievement presented in this report are not new. Lee (1991) noted more than a decade ago:

1. The overall mean achievement scores for Black male students are below those of other groups in the basic subject areas.
2. Black males are much more likely to be placed in classes for the educable mentally retarded and for students with learning disabilities than in gifted and talented classes.
3. Black males are far more likely to be placed in general education and vocational high school curricular tracks than in an academic track.
4. Black males are suspended from school more frequently and for longer periods of time than other student groups.
5. Black males complete high school at lower rates than Black females.

Despite ongoing reform efforts nationally and in local schools, these statistics hold true almost two decades later. Little progress has been made.

How do Black males navigate these academic and social conditions? Majors and Billson (1992) and Tatum (2005) noted that Black males often adopt a "cool pose" persona—nonchalant, tough, hostile, emotionless, and uncaring—to save face and to cope with external pressures and oppression. Cool pose is a defense mechanism that is adopted as a way to (a) cope with oppression, invisibility, and marginality; (b) render him visible and empower himself; (c) communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style; (d) maintain a balance between inner life and his social environment; (e) cope with conflict and anxiety; (f) neutralize stress; (g) manage his feelings of rage in the face of prejudice and discrimination; and (h) counter negative forces in life (Tatum, 2005, p. 29).

Hence, Black males are less likely to share their feeling and emotions, to disclose with teachers and others interested in their welfare (Bonner, 2001; Grantham, 1998, 2004a, 2004b; Hébert, 2002). To repeat, these youth may avoid institutions and activities that are considered "uncool"—schools, libraries, bookstores, museums, and churches. Not surprisingly, when one is "cool," there can be negative consequences. The Black male's potential and growth are thwarted because of his refusal to assimilate or to otherwise become involved in experiences that could help broaden his personal, social, and political consciousness. Thus, understanding social injustices from targeting by law enforcement to low-level tracking in academic areas, he gets into trouble more often with authority figures, mainly those who lack an understanding of the use of behavior (cool pose) as a coping mechanism. This complex set of negative interactions form a rarely broken vicious cycle.

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS FACING BLACK MALES IDENTIFIED AS GIFTED

Recently, a colleague shared the following story with me. School personnel were transporting Black students to an awards event in which students were to be honored for outstanding academic achievement. One Black male, a junior named Keith, approached the school van dressed in baggy pants, an overly large sweatshirt, and headband. Upon entering the van, he proceeded to pull off the outer layers of his outfit to expose a crisp dress shirt and creased khaki pants. He swapped tennis shoes for casual shoes. Before anyone could question him, the young man asserted: "I have an image to maintain." Being smart isn't part of that image. Not surprisingly, after the event and before returning to school, Keith went back into what his peers would accept him in, the original "urban" outfit.

The story is reminiscent of the DuBoisian¹ notion of two warring souls. How does he make compromises in negotiating

the need for achievement and the need for affiliation or social acceptance? How does one reconcile being Black and being an American, namely, in a society where racial injustices continue to exist? Keith's story and so many others like it beg several questions: How many gifted, high-achieving Black males feel they must hide or camouflage their intelligence and academic accomplishments? How many Black males, even when recognized as gifted, do not feel comfortable being intelligent and are willing to sacrifice academics for social or peer acceptance? What is life like for Black males who are gifted and high achievers?

Building upon the seminal work of Ford (1992–2006) over the last decade on under-representation of Black students in gifted education, and that of Grantham (1998, 2004a, 2004b) and Hébert (2002), it appears that social issues, including stereotypes and peer pressures, contribute to the low rates of Black students being recognized and formally identified as gifted. Stereotypes about Black males inhibit teachers and other educators from seeing strengths in these students (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002; Grantham, 1998; Steele, 2003). Instead, educators focus on the shortcomings (both real and imposed) of these males. The idea that educators—those in positions of power, influence, and authority—would be biased or prejudiced is a sensitive one; thus, educators seldom wish to entertain this idea. Yet, ample data indicate that educators often have lower expectations for Black students (especially males) than for other students (e.g., Kozol, 1991, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2005). These stereotypes and low expectations surely must affect the extent to which educators refer Black males for gifted education screening and assessment.

Negative peer pressures also compromise and test the motivation and achievement of gifted Black males. In several studies, Ford (1992, 1996, 2005) found that gifted Black males were more likely than gifted Black females to report negative pressures from peers when they do well academically. Specifically, Black males are likely to be accused of “acting White” or “selling out” when they are academically inclined, when they participate in gifted edu-

cation and AP classes, and when they are self-disciplined in school. Ferguson (2001, 2002), Fordham and Ogbu (1988), and Ogbu (1992, 2004) have reported similar findings.

Exacerbating this misperception that to achieve is to act White, Black males face pressures from peers who believe that being a high achiever and being intelligent is not masculine or is otherwise feminine (e.g., Majors & Billson, 1992). Thus, though many Black males get accolades for their physical and musical talents (Sailes, 2004), too many also get teased or ridiculed for their intellectual or academic talents. All variants of these peer pressures effectively place much strain and stress on the motivations and academic identities of gifted Black males.

Cross and Vandiver's (2001) theory of racial identity has shed additional and compelling light on the deleterious effects of racialized discriminatory encounters on the mental health of Blacks, including those identified as gifted. According to such theories and hundreds of studies, Blacks progress through three phases of racial identity as they experience race-based encounters—preencounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. When gifted Black students encounter racism, including messages that they are less capable or less competent than their White classmates, they may begin to question their academic potential and disidentify with their cultural backgrounds and academic achievement (e.g., wish or prefer to be White, reject being Black, have low racial salience, second-guess their academic competence; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Cross and Vandiver's research indicates that these individuals would be in the preencounter phase of racial identity.

There is no question that racism places a special White tax² on the lives of gifted and high-achieving Black students in several ways: (a) they may go through the stages of racial identity at an earlier age and more intensely, due, in part, to being highly perceptive and thoughtful; and (b) they face additional negative pressures (see Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006). One type of pressure comes from intraracial peers who feel threatened or abandoned by their high-achieving peers; these students tease gifted Black students and attempt to sabotage their success or, to camouflage their own low sense of self-worth, those peers will adopt a cool pose as protection. The second type of pressure comes from White peers who alienate and reject high-achieving and/or gifted Black students. This rejection may be especially hurtful if there are few Black students in the student's gifted education classes. This type of alienation is often rooted in White

¹DuBois described this double consciousness in the following way: After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” (Excerpted from the chapter “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” in DuBois' book *The Souls of Black Folk*)

²Generally referred to as a “Black tax,” or the toll paid by Blacks because they are not White, the use of “White tax” is a paradigm shift with regard to race, White anti-Black discriminatory practices and language. In effect, the argument is that Whites levy against Blacks, whether intentional or unintentional, a tax due to their, as W.E.B. Dubois called it, “unforgivable Blackness.”

privilege, in multimedia stereotypes of Black males, and in ignorance of groups different from their own. The final type of peer pressure comes from other diverse groups, who, like White students, may have stereotypes of other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Latino students who have stereotypes about Native American students; Black students who have stereotypes about Latino students). Thus, gifted Black students (and other racially/ethnically diverse students) may deliberately underachieve and refuse to participate in gifted education classes for psychological reasons (e.g., internalized deficit thinking as described by Cross & Vandiver, 2001) and socioemotional reasons (e.g., fear of rejection and isolation). Clearly, when one adds negative peer pressures to deficit thinking held by some educators, the mixture can be volatile and detrimental—our most capable Black males do not reach their potential (Ford et al., 2006).

With so many social pressures that deny gifted Black males their right to be high achievers, what can be done? How can educators help to mitigate the many aforementioned barriers confronting this student population? Later, I argue that a scholar identity can disrupt the cycle of low academic engagement and poor achievement among Black males, including those identified as gifted. What can we learn from research on resilience? What can we learn from theory and research in sociology and psychological, namely, scholarship on motivation, identity, and achievement? As a bonus, the conceptual model has implications for a broader population. In other words, many of the characteristics of the model are generalizable to other groups; however, this model becomes more specific to Black males when masculinity and racial identity are added.

SCHOLAR IDENTITY MODEL

The academic and social challenges that confront Black males in classrooms suggest a pressing need for programmed or systematic interventions on the part of educators (Grantham, 2004a, 2004b; Lee, 1991, 2006). Efforts by educators can and must play a proactive role in promoting developmental initiatives at both the elementary and secondary level for these students. Such initiatives must focus on helping Black males to develop the attitudes, behaviors, and values necessary to function at optimal levels at school and in the world (Lee, 1991, 2006). That is, Black males, including those identified as gifted, require specific support and guidance to master educational and sociocultural challenges.

Such support can be provided in many ways (Grantham, 2004a; Hébert, 2002; Whiting, 2006). At the heart of each type of support must be a focus on changing Black male's self-perception—their self-esteem, self-concept, and racial identity—in academic-oriented settings. Focusing specifically on self-esteem, in 1990, the California State Department of Education published a report of the California Task Force to *Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social*

Responsibility (as cited in Christensen, 1992). The report defined self-esteem as “Appreciating my own worth and importance, and having the character to be accountable for myself and to act responsibly toward others” (Executive Summary, p. 1). A central finding of the task force was that self-esteem is the best candidate for a “social vaccine”—something that empowers us to live responsibly and that inoculates us against the lures of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy . . . and educational failure” (p. 4). Students with high or positive self-esteem are less likely to engage in self-destructive and self-defeating behaviors. Equally noteworthy is that the task force found that the school environment plays a significant role in a student's development of self-esteem.

One promising strategy to address self-perception or identity issues (self-esteem, self-concept, and racial identity) is through culturally specific or culturally responsive counseling experiences in school settings. These empowerment experiences should develop within Black males the attitudes and skills necessary for academic achievement, foster positive and responsible behavior, as well as provide opportunities to critically analyze the image of Black men, expose participants to Black male role models, and develop a sense of cultural and historical pride in the accomplishments of Black males (Grantham, 2004a; Lee, 1991).

As already noted, many Black males find their identities, their pride, their self-efficacy, and their self-esteem in a limited number of domains—sports, music, and acting (Hébert, 2002; Sailes, 2004). Many aspire to these areas and find their heroes and role models in these industries. Less often do Black males see themselves as capable and talented beings in school settings. These counterproductive self-images can and must change. Regardless of the age group we work with, it is still possible—and certainly essential—to change the way Black males see themselves intellectually and academically.

To support the process of image building among gifted Black males, educators must recognize the importance of how having a scholar identity can improve the motivation, achievement, and aspirations of these students. I define a scholar identity as one in which Black males perceive themselves as academicians, as studious, and as intelligent or talented in school settings. In my work with Black males, I have come to the conclusion that several characteristics contribute to a scholar identity (Whiting, 2006a; 2006b). I share these characteristics with the hopes that readers will become more optimistic and more empowered as they work with Black males, too many of whom have heretofore not been recognized, developed, or nurtured, even at a very young age. I offer a central proposition in this article—if educators (along with families and community leaders) can nurture a scholar identity within these otherwise capable students, then more Black males will achieve their potential in school and life. And more Black males will end up being recruited and retained in gifted programs.

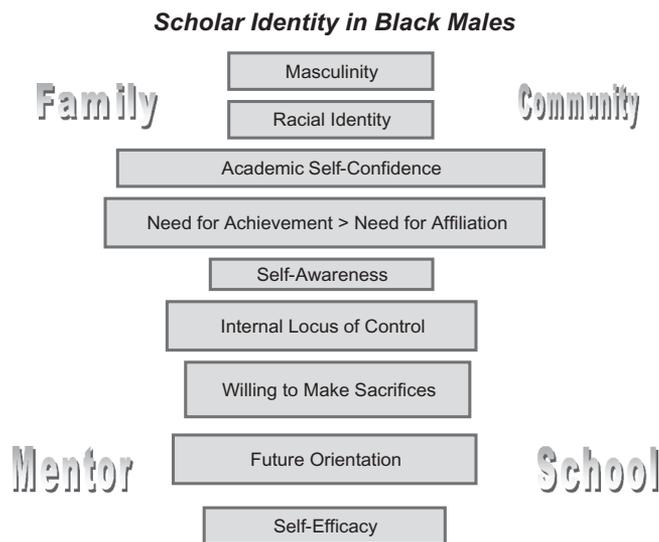


FIGURE 2 Conceptual model: Characteristics of a scholar identity. Note: Adapted from "Promoting a scholar identity among African-American males: Implications for gifted education," by G. W. Whiting, 2006, *Gifted Education Press Quarterly*, 20(3), pp. 2–6.

I believe that there are at least nine characteristics of someone who possesses a scholar identity (see Figure 2). The first seven characteristics are somewhat generic or neutral relative to race and gender; however, the model becomes race specific and gender specific when the last two characteristics (racial identity and masculinity) are included. In the model, self-efficacy lays the foundation for other areas of a scholar identity; hence, it is described first. Self-efficacy helps the Black male to be resilient and persistent when facing barriers and challenges.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SCHOLAR IDENTITY

Self-Efficacy

In his seminal theory, Bandura (1977, 1986) reported that the role of self-efficacy in academic settings, including one's self-image as a learner in the context of academic achievement, cannot be ignored or trivialized. Self-efficacy is the belief that "I can do it; I am competent and able." Self-efficacy is another aspect of our identity. Specifically, similar to self-concept and self-esteem, self-efficacy plays a critical part in how a student performs in school settings. In the proposed model, self-efficacy lays the corner stone of a scholar identity; it serves as the foundation for the other characteristics, as illustrated in Figure 1. Black males with a scholar identity have a positive and healthy dose of

self-efficacy. Leading scholars on gifted Black students (e.g., Ford, 1996; Grantham, 2004a, 2004b; Hilliard, 2003) contend that resilience is a noticeable characteristic of high-achieving or gifted Black males. When self-efficacy is high, these Black males appear to share a few characteristics: (a) high resilience; (b) high self-confidence; (c) high self-control; (d) a strong sense of self-responsibility; and (e) a clear understanding of the tasks they face and the belief that they can accomplish all the subtasks associated with their goal. Further, they believe that they are strong students. They elect to reject stereotypes imposed on them because they deem themselves to be intelligent and talented. They are determined to not be deterred by challenges or setbacks because they are optimistic. With such efficacious attitudes, they are more willing to seek out academic challenges.

Willing to Make Sacrifices

Success often comes with setbacks. Trials and tribulations are part of the success equation. That is, trials and tribulations are necessary for reaching both short-term and long-term goals. There can be no progress, no achievement without sacrifice, as James Allen is often cited in, *As a Man Thinketh* (Allen, 1960). In this vein, African American males who have a scholar identity also understand how some sacrifices are necessary in order to reach many goals and objectives. Therefore, they are more likely to sacrifice some of their social life (e.g., extracurricular activities, excessive time at play, watching TV, dating, having

an extensive social life, and so on) in order to reach self-defined and valued goals. They understand Frederick Douglass's (1985, p. 204) sage statement: "No Struggle, No Progress. . . . We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice."

Internal Locus of Control

Locus of control (LOC) refers to people's general beliefs about the causes of their successes and failures, particularly their own responsibility in such outcomes (Rotter, 1966). An internal LOC is the belief that outcomes (e.g., good grades, high test scores, poor test scores) are controlled by or due to one's ability (namely, intelligence) and/or effort (e.g., lack of preparation, did not study); conversely, an external LOC is the belief that outcomes are controlled by fate and circumstances out of one's control (e.g., unfair test, difficult teacher, poor explanations, bad luck, etc.).

African American males who have an internal locus of control are optimistic; these males believe that they can do well in school because they have a strong work ethic; they participate in class; they study; and they do school assignments for intrinsic reasons. Just as important, when they fail or do poorly in school, males with an internal locus of control are willing to ask for help; they are not ashamed to say, "I am confused, I'm frustrated, I don't understand" or "I just need to study more next time." Thus, these Black males are less likely to blame low achievement, failure, or mistakes on others. Instead, they take responsibility for their behaviors and choices while being realistic and watchful of outside pressures and societal injustices.

Future Oriented

Work on the relationship between aspirations and academic achievement has a long history. Motivation theories and research (e.g., Dweck, 2002; Graham, 1998; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000) indicate that people who have aspirations stay focused; they keep an eye on the past and present as they prepare for their future. They think about how their current behaviors and decisions influence future outcomes. Black males with high and realistic aspirations are not overly concerned about immediate gratification and short-term interests and goals. These students set realistic goals—goals that must be achieved with an education; likewise, they recognize and appreciate the importance of high grades, excellent school attendance, and the benefits of taking challenging courses (e.g., AP, IB, and honors classes) in order to achieve their goals.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is tantamount to looking inward and knowing thyself. It is an open, honest appraisal and understanding of one's strengths and limitations (Cooley, 1902; Silvia & Duval, 2001). African American males with high self-awareness do not let their weaknesses distract them from

putting forth effort in school. Quite the opposite—these Black males are able to adjust and find ways to compensate for their weaknesses (e.g., they get a tutor in classes where they are not doing well; they study longer, and they study frequently). They work smarter, not harder, to the extent that they advocate for themselves.

Need for Achievement

According to McClelland's (1966) Need to Achieve Theory, many people have an intense need to achieve and succeed. Achievement-oriented people desire to do well and consistently try to find ways to do their work better. They are mastery oriented to the extent that they are more concerned about personal achievement than rewards (Dweck, 1999), and they set high but achievable goals for themselves. McClelland maintains that these people are desirable for companies because their drive to succeed and achieve makes them work harder and they think of better ways of accomplishing goals.

For Black males who have a scholar identity, the need for achievement is stronger than the need for affiliation, which is consistent with McClelland's (1966) theory. Thus, their identities are not determined by the number of friends they have or their popularity. Rather, they value the quality of friendships over the quantity of friends. They want a social life and friends; however, they are not troubled about being popular for the sake of popularity. African American males with a strong need for achievement understand that high academic achievement will take them farther in life than being social or popular. In this sense, school and learning come first, serving as a guide for most of their choices and behaviors.

Academic Self-Confidence

Dweck (1999) argued that students' views of themselves in academic settings—their academic self-confidence—play a critical and fundamental role in their school achievement. Essentially, her work demonstrates that students who believe that they are intelligent and capable in school are more likely to be persistent and more likely to persist than other students. Black males with academic self-confidence believe that they are strong or excellent students. They feel comfortable and confident in academic settings, they enjoy learning, they enjoy rigor, they seek challenges, and they value toying with ideas. Most importantly, they do not feel inferior or inadequate in academic settings and challenging classes; nor do they feel the need to camouflage, negate, deny, or minimize their academic abilities and skills. As previously stated, these males have a strong work ethic. They spend time doing schoolwork; they study and require little pushing from parents and teachers. Essentially, Black males with positive or high academic self-confidence understand that effort is just as important, or more important, than the ability to succeed.

Racial Identity

In the 1930s and later, Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark (1939a, 1939b, 1940, 1947, 1950) shared research on their doll studies to illustrate the harmful effects of segregation on Black children. Their studies, in particular, showed that Black children (preschoolers) viewed Black dolls as inferior to White dolls. These findings had a powerful influence on the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision to end segregation. Their work eventually encapsulated the concept of racial identity and pride and further demonstrated the potentially negative effects of segregation and educational deprivation on children's psyches.

Much can be borrowed from this research when working with Black males. Essentially, one must consider their identities relative to race and gender. As with self-esteem and self-concept, racial identity affects Black males' achievement and motivation (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). For these males, race has high salience; they are comfortable being identified as Black; they have racial pride. These Black males seek greater self-understanding as racial beings but are also aware of the importance of adapting to their environment and being multicultural, namely, being confident and at ease in both White and Black settings (Cross & Vandiver). These males do not equate achievement with acting White or selling out (Ferguson 2001, 2002; Ford, 1996; Fordham, 1988); thus, they refuse to be defined by social injustices based on gender and race or ethnicity. They refuse to succumb to low expectations and will work diligently to change such expectations.

Masculinity

Masculinity is an oft-misunderstood, sensitive, and controversial topic. In this model, I refer only to the sense that African American males with a scholar identity do not equate being intelligent, studious or talented with being feminine or unmanly. Rather than inculcate these ideas, these African American males believe that males are intelligent and that being gifted or intelligent does not detract from one's sense of masculinity or manhood and manliness (hooks, 2004; Majors, 1986; Majors & Billson, 1992; Staples, 1982; Whiting, 2006a, 2006b). If allowed, youth will, through multimedia sources, family, community, and school, develop a destructive meaning of masculinity. Without the guidance of caring and responsible adults, young Black males will be forever challenged to reach their potential.

SCHOLAR IDENTITY: SOME STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING BLACK MALES

Having detailed the characteristics of a scholar identity, I now turn to some strategies for its promotion. I build upon Lee's (1991) work, which proposes several developmental

guidelines that are an essential part of any school-based empowerment initiative.

Empowerment Strategies Should Be Developmental

Far too often, the only guidance young Black males receive comes after they have committed an offense against the social order. Generally, the goal of such "guidance" is not on skill development but rather punishment. Educators should be proactive (focus on prevention first and foremost) in their efforts to empower Black males to meet challenges that often lead to problems in school and beyond.

Empowerment Strategies Should Provide for Competent Adult Black Male Leaders

This guideline is important for at least two reasons. Specifically, some scholars believe that only a Black man can teach a Black boy how to become a Black man. By virtue of attaining adult status as someone who is Black *and* male, the Black male alone has the gender and cultural perspectives and experiences to accurately address the developmental challenges facing Black boys (Grantham, 2004b; Lee, 1991). However, *seeing* yourself in an individual who most closely embodies the characteristics (race and gender) ascribed to you in a positive light has value that is intrinsically sought. Therefore, I propose, without apology, that it is only a Black man who can *fully* model the attitudes and behaviors of successful Black manhood. Empathy is greatest when people share similar race and gender backgrounds and experiences. It is only a Black man who can say to a Black male child or teen, "I've been there; I've had that happen to me for similar reasons; I share your pain." Having said this, it is true that Black females, and males and females from other racial groups, have been able to successfully raise and educate Black males (e.g., Carson, 1999; Suskind, 1998).

Recruit and Retain Qualified Black Males as Leaders and Teachers in Schools

Black males comprise 1% of the teaching profession (Condition of Education, 2009) and several organizations have taken a stand for increasing teacher diversity and have created initiatives to recruit more diverse groups into the teaching profession (e.g., the Association of Teacher Educators, the NEA Foundation, and the American Educational Research Association). Given the paucity of Black male educators in American schools (reaching epidemic portions), it is commonplace for Black boys to go through an entire school career with little or no interaction with a Black male teacher, counselor, or administrator. When necessary, therefore, efforts should be made to actively recruit, train, and support Black men who can serve as leaders or role models in empowerment interventions.

Empowerment Strategies Should Be Culturally Responsive

Educators need to find ways to incorporate African and African American cultural dimensions into the empowerment process for young Black males. Culture-specific or culturally responsive approaches to academic and counseling intervention transform basic aspects of Black life, generally ignored or perceived as negative in the traditional educational framework, into positive developmental experiences. For example, Black art forms (e.g., music, poetry) and culture-specific curriculum materials might be incorporated into empowerment interventions as counseling or educational resources (see Ford & Harris, 1999 for extensive multicultural curriculum that challenges students who are gifted and diverse; also see the works of James Banks, Geneva Gay, Janice Hale, Asa Hilliard, Kwanza Kunjufu, Jacqueline Irvine, and Barbara Shade).

Scholars who promote culturally responsive curricula recognize the power of this curriculum to transform the lives of Black students (e.g., Banks, 2006; Ford & Harris, 1999; Gay, 2004). They argue that Black students will become more motivated and engaged when they see themselves affirmed in the materials and content. According to Banks, when teachers infuse multicultural content into the curriculum, Black students feel more empowered (e.g., a greater sense of self-efficacy). Reading the biographies of Black heroes—past and present—can help inspire Black males as well as develop their sense of social justice (e.g., W.E.B. DuBois; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; Vivien Thomas; James Baldwin; Ralph Ellison; Carter G. Woodson; Henry Louis Gates; Cornel West; Haki R. Madhubuti; Michael E. Dyson; and Frantz Fanon). This list of scholars is not meant to preclude women scholars, but the focus must be on healthy empowerment of young Black males. Tatum (2005) recommends other literature and activities designed to address the reading gap among Black adolescent males.

Empowerment Strategies (e.g., Rites-of-Passage Ceremony)

Unlike the traditions of African culture where great significance was attached to the transition from boyhood to manhood, there is little ceremony in contemporary African American culture for the formal acknowledgement of life transitions for young boys. It is important, therefore, that at the completion of any empowerment experience for Black males, there is some ceremonial acknowledgement of their accomplishment. Families and males from the community should be encouraged to participate in these ceremonies (see Whiting, 2004).

Having shared some guidelines to consider in empowerment initiatives, I now turn to three specific recommendations for change.

FROM BLACK MALE EMPOWERMENT TO EDUCATOR EMPOWERMENT

The academic and social problems confronting Black males are often exacerbated by the attitudes and practices of educators, which often suggest a lack of sensitivity or understanding of Black culture and the dynamics of Black male development (Bonner, 2001; Grantham, 1998, 2004b; Lee, 1991). Educators focused on Black male empowerment must assume the role of educational advocate and caregiver. Educational advocacy involves consultation activities initiated by educators to help their colleagues to better understand the dynamics of male development from a Black perspective and make the teaching and learning process more relevant to Black male realities.

Culturally Sensitive Attitudes and Behaviors

It is an educator's unalterable responsibility to challenge and to change any attitudes or behaviors that may be detrimental to the academic, social, and emotional well-being of Black male students (Lee, 1991). Educational advocates, therefore, should help school personnel to (a) examine policies and procedures to ensure that teachers and counselors do not under-refer Black males for gifted education screening; (b) recognize and challenge stereotypes they may have acquired about Black males and their expectations of them; and (c) develop an understanding of gender and cultural diversity, namely developmental, social, and academic issues facing males in general, as well as males who are culturally and linguistically diverse (see Figure 1).

Culturally Responsive Content and Methods

Optimal learning occurs when Black males perceive that they are appreciated and respected, as is their unique view of the world (Lee, 1991). Educational advocates should, therefore, (a) find ways to integrate the accomplishments of Black men into the existing curriculum structure and (b) continuously examine the curriculum to ensure that Black males are included in primary and nonstereotypical ways (Banks, 2006). To do so, educators must seek educational and social experiences whereby they can gain extensive preparation in becoming culturally aware, sensitive, and competent (e.g., Storti, 1998, 1999).

Black Male Role Model Presence

In addition to increasing the number of Black male educators, as previously noted, strategies must be aimed at compensating for role model absence in the school setting (Grantham, 2004a, 2004b). Educational advocates, therefore, should help school personnel to (a) find ways to ensure the inclusion of Black males in classroom activities as tutors, educational assistants, storytellers, "room fathers,"

and field trip escorts; (b) find ways to encourage the participation of Black males in parent–teacher associations and other school organizations; and (c) acknowledge the importance of noneducational personnel (e.g., Black male custodians and lunchroom staff) as valid mentors/role models and find ways to use them in the educational process wherever possible.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

For reasons discussed throughout this article, few Black males have been formally identified as gifted and those who are identified face unique barriers. Thus, those who need the challenge are failing to reach their potential and failing to gain access to needed educational services. Too many of these males face social barriers—from adults and peers—and they have come to believe that they are neither intelligent nor academically capable. This waste of human potential and talent must be rectified. One strategy offered herein is that educators can help put Black males on the right trajectory by focusing on their self-perceptions in academic settings. That is, a scholar identity model was proposed as one model that can be adopted to address low achievement, underachievement, and academic disengagement among Black males. The sooner we begin this process of change, the sooner we can alter the academic and social forecast of these male students.

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