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African American Males in Urban Schools: No Excuses—Teach and Empower

The author outlines five promising principles, emerging from his research, on teaching that can empower teachers and Black male students in urban school contexts. In particular, teachers and students (a) envision life beyond their present situations, (b) come to know themselves in relation to others, (c) speak possibility and not destruction, (d) care and demonstrate that care, and (e) change their thinking to change their actions. The author argues that those in education should stop making excuses for why schools are failing Black male students, especially in urban schools, and do what is necessary to meet these students' needs. The central theme of the article is one of next level education, a new and more promising level of education for Black students achievable when effort and commitment are present.

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I AM AN AFRICAN AMERICAN¹ man, and I was educated in public schools. I was not raised with a great deal of money, although my family's needs were met. We were not rich, but I did not know what it meant to not have clothes to wear or food to eat. Both of my parents worked—and I mean they worked very hard to provide for our family. I did not take trips out of the country or visit museums during holidays. My parents did not read me bedtime stories every night before I went to sleep; instead, my parents (especially my mother) made sure that I had said my prayers before falling asleep and that all my homework was completed and done correctly. My parents taught me to work hard, take responsibility for my choices (both good and bad), and to put forth my best effort in all that I set out to do.

In a similar light, my teachers were not *board certified*. In elementary school, almost all of my classmates were Black. At that time, there were perhaps one or two White students in my classes, but most of the students were Black. My teachers were both Black and White. Most of them came to school and taught us in spite of their personal situations and issues, and regardless of their students' situations. I was empowered to learn and to achieve in school.

As a faculty member in a teaching and learning department, and as an educational researcher, I often find myself amazed and a bit disappointed by the enormous list of excuses available for why Black male students are not succeeding in school. Black male students can and are succeeding in all types of schools—urban included—and the time has come for those of us in education to stop making excuses and to teach and empower Black males to reach their full capacity in urban schools across the nation.

My point in sharing a bit about myself in the previous paragraphs is not to suggest that my experiences are completely synonymous with all other Black males in schools. However, my point in sharing just a small piece of my upbringing and my identity is to offer a snapshot of the counternarratives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997) available and needed to (re)direct the discourse on Black males in education.

In this article, I attempt to outline some promising perspectives on teaching that can empower Black males in urban school contexts. I argue that Black males have a wide range of potential and that teachers can *and must* teach and empower these students and stop making excuses. Reports about African American males are inundated with challenges and struggles of Black males in urban schools. I argue that, although there is a plethora of unfortunate situations and experiences that these students face, there is no excuse for teachers' lack of effort and commitment to meeting the needs of Black males in urban schools. At the same time, there are situations in which teachers find themselves that are far beyond their control. For instance, a teacher may not be able to control whether particular students receive help from their parents on homework each night. Similarly, teachers cannot necessarily control whether students will grow up in a nuclear family with two parents in the home or whether students will grow up and live in poverty.

Clearly, the aforementioned experiences and situations are beyond teachers' control. However, there are research-based strategies and suggestions that can help teachers meet the needs of Black male students in urban contexts, regardless of the students' circumstances and situations.

What can teachers do that *is in their control* to teach and empower these students to reach their possibility? Much of what I share in this article emerges from my own life experiences, from my own research that I have conducted in the past and currently in an urban middle school.² The pervasive theme of this article is that teachers can move their practices to the next level, a new and more promising level of education for Black students, when effort and commitment are present. In addition, it is important to note that this article is not written as a fairytale—one that is simply a vision or a dream of what can be. Rather, this article is written from a *what could and should be* perspective. The discussion shifts now to one that highlights some current trends about Black males in urban classrooms, communities, and schools.

African American Males in Urban Classrooms

African American males in urban schools are often perceived as troubled students whose futures are in limbo. A report from the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2004) stressed:

In many school districts, up to 70 percent of black boys who enter 9th grade do not graduate four years later with their peers. In most districts, black boys are disproportionately assigned to special education and nearly absent from advanced placement classes. (p. 2)

Black male students are grossly underrepresented in gifted education and overrepresented in special education. Ford (2006) wrote: "Sadly, I have seen little progress relative to demographic changes—Black and Hispanic students continue to be as underrepresented in gifted programs today as they were 20 years ago" (p. 2). Holzman (2004), from The Schott Foundation for Public Education, placed the urgent nature of teaching Black students at the top of the foundation's agenda in *Public Education and Black Male Students: A State Report Card*. In short, the report card revealed that "in 2001/2002 59% of African-American males did not receive diplomas with

their cohort” (p. 4). Moreover, where education is concerned, the report revealed that “New York City and Chicago, for example, enrolling nearly 10% of the nation’s Black male students between them, fail to graduate 70% of those [black males] with their peers” (p. 4). Central and salient questions about why Black students are not receiving the education they deserve need attention.

Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) analyzed disciplinary records of 11,001 students in 19 middle schools in a large, urban Midwestern public school district during the 1994–1995 school year. Skiba et al. reported a “differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, wherein African American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective in interpretation” (p. 317). The Skiba et al. study pointed out that students of color, and particularly African American male students, overwhelmingly received harsher punishments for misbehavior than did their White counterparts. As an example, the authors described a fistfight at a high school football game in Decatur, Illinois that resulted in the superintendent’s recommendation that all seven of the African American students involved be expelled from school for 2 years. Apparently, in the same district, weapons were used in a fight involving White students and less severe punishment was imposed upon those students. Why are some groups of students—particularly Black males—punished more severely and more frequently than are others? Admittedly, the answers to the questions about the state, needs, and conditions of Black males in urban schools are quite complex; there are no cookie-cutter principles to improve the educational experiences of Black male students. In this light, I propose that teachers and schools take their teaching and education to another level, one that enables success for Black male students.

Next Level Education

Next level education, as I have come to conceptualize it, is an education that moves beyond the rhetoric of policy and reform to one of practice, commitment, effort, and results. It

is about states, school districts, schools, classrooms, teachers, and principals providing a space where excellence precedes anything else. In other words, teachers do *whatever is necessary* for students to learn, achieve, and meet their capacity. As I have come to understand next level education for Black students, there are several critical components (not necessarily in this order). Here, I attempt to outline five central principles to next level education (although there are others):

- Teachers and students *envision life beyond their present situations.*
- Teachers and students *come to know themselves in relation to others.*
- Teachers and students *speak possibility and not destruction.*
- Teachers and students *care and demonstrate that care.*
- Teachers and students *change their thinking to change their actions.*

Envisioning Life Beyond the Present

It is critical for teachers to look beyond their current situations and to empower African American male students to envision a life beyond their present situations. Clearly, there is room for each of us—from the very wealthy to those in poverty, from various ethnic backgrounds, from every region of the nation—to move beyond our current situation. Next level thinking and education require us to prepare ourselves for circumstances, experiences, situations, and opportunities beyond our current status. More than a decade ago, Siddle-Walker (1996) stressed that teachers should attempt to push students to reach their potential. Envisioning life beyond the present suggests that individuals are not necessarily *there* yet but are *pursuing* new heights in their lives (socially, economically, emotionally, educationally, and politically). As I have come to understand visionary and next level education, success comes along the way-in pursuit of excellence. We often experience success by pressing or pursuing new levels in our lives.

Similarly, where Black male students are concerned, teachers should envision their own teaching and the experiences of their students beyond

what they (as teachers) and their students exhibit at present. In her analyses of valuable African American teachers during segregation, Siddle-Walker (2000) explained that teachers worked overtime to help their African American students learn: Although these teachers were teaching their students during segregation, they were preparing their students for a world of integration. In other words, teachers envision the possibility, the expected and the unexpected, as they teach and empower Black male students.

Black males need to understand that their future situations can be brighter than their current situations. If a student has never known or seen anything but mediocrity, it is probably going to be difficult for that student to envision a different path; he or she will probably strive for mediocrity. However, when students realize that they may be struggling and not succeeding currently, but that it is quite possible for them to turn their lives around, they are more likely to work harder. I have observed and interviewed Black male students who felt that they would not be successful at one point but realized that they could turn their lives around and succeed.

The change in these Black male students' educational experiences did not come easily. Mostly, their change (where school and education are concerned) emerged from teachers and schools that refused to give up on the students. For instance, teachers gave the Black male students multiple opportunities to complete their assignments and provided alternative assessments for the students. In short, the teachers refused to grant the students permission to fail (Ladson-Billings, 2002); the teachers were invested in the students, and they realized what could happen to those students in the future without some serious attention and commitment. The teachers had a mission to teach their students because they realized the risks and consequences in store for their Black male students if they did not teach them and if the students did not learn. An undereducated and underprepared Black male student could result in obliteration (drug abuse, prison, or even death). In addition to envisioning possibility, teachers and students should understand themselves in relation to others.

Understanding the Self in Relation to Others

Understanding the self in teaching and learning, and having the skills to engage in a process to come to know oneself in a particular context, are important (Freire, 1998; Howard, 2001; Rios, 1996). Next level education requires that teachers consistently engage in activities and experiences that allow them to know themselves and others—particularly their students—more intently. West (1993) explained that it is difficult for a person to work for emancipation on behalf of others until he or she is free. In other words, teachers understand who they are in relation to others, and they consistently attempt to know themselves as they are changing and evolving in the classroom with Black male students. Thinking about the self in relation to others means that teachers think deeply about their own perspectives, privileges, beliefs, and life worlds in conjunction, comparison, and contrast to their students' and their students' communities.

As Brown (2004) explained, teachers who make the most profound and meaningful improvements in their knowledge and understanding of cultural and racial diversity “have explored their personal histories and value systems; developed an understanding, respect, and value for other cultures; and expanded their reference group membership to include others” (p. 327). McAllister and Irvine (2002), in their important study of 34 practicing teachers' beliefs about empathy and working with culturally diverse students, found that the teachers' practices were enhanced when they had empathetic dispositions. Empathetic teachers, according to McAllister and Irvine, “take on the perspective of another culture” (p. 433). An important finding of this study was that the teachers empathized *with* their students and did not pity them. The problems and situations that the students faced became problems and situations that the teachers *and* the students faced and solved together.

In my research, I have observed and interviewed teachers who admitted that they were struggling with making connections, in pursuit of student learning, with their students. The teach-

ers, at one point in their careers, struggled with classroom management in particular. They were able to improve their practices with their students because they were proactive in learning more about themselves and, consequently, learning about themselves in relation to their students. One teacher reported that he enrolled in a series of professional development sessions that focused on diversity. Another teacher explained that she started assigning journal writing activities that focused on the students' in and out of school experiences; another teacher stressed that she reached out to students' parents when conflicts emerged in the classroom. The communication with the parents was not one of blame but one of learning, where the teachers and parents worked *together* to figure out how best to make learning happen in the classroom.

In short, teachers come to know themselves in relation to others, and students come to know themselves in relation to others. To achieve this next level of education, teachers and students have a sense of their histories. They examine their histories (from various perspectives but especially from educational, political, racial, and social perspectives) and examine them critically. In other words, it is not enough to know something about oneself. Understanding the self in relation to others requires that teachers and students see themselves as racialized beings and that they realize that much of what they have heard and read about themselves and others may be fallacy. For instance, Black males understand a history that places them in a light of survival and possibility and not necessarily one that places them as substandard or inferior. Similarly, teachers and Black students speak possibility, not destruction, in the lives of others.

Speaking Possibility, Not Destruction

There is an old saying: "Talk is cheap." I strongly disagree because our language, our discourse, the ways in which we communicate, can have a profound influence on the lives of others. Black male students often hear the negative position about their lives and situations. *Talk, in*

this sense, is expensive because the kinds of information teachers (and others) share with students have the potential to propel or stifle Black students. We pay a huge price when we speak destruction into the lives of students. Black male students hear people talk about them in deficit terms. They hear the media classify them as *at risk*. They understand that they are often not *supposed* to be successful. Haberman (2000) suggested, "Language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. The terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement" (p. 203).

Based on my research and what I have come to understand, there are important connections between the notion of respect and the kinds of relationships that teachers can have with Black male students. Black male students respect their teachers when their teachers respect them. To be clear, teachers can and are successful in exerting their authority while, at the same time, demonstrating respect for their Black male students. Successful teachers of Black male students do not put their students down; they value Black male students' perspectives and provide them space to have voice in the classroom. They empower the students to speak about what could be in their lives, and the teachers themselves speak about future opportunities and possibilities for the lives of their students.

For instance, teachers who empower Black male students reject teaching styles similar to teachers in Anyon's (1980) study, where certain groups of students were taught to conduct menial jobs, absent of the mind. In contrast, successful teachers of Black male students used examples that placed Black male students in corporate positions, even in the lowest tracked and remedial classes. In mathematics classrooms, the teachers could have used examples where the students were working at McDonalds—speaking a reality to students that does not necessarily consider the possibilities of the students' lives. Instead, the mathematics teachers used examples that placed the students in jobs working at the bank or as accountants in corporate firms. An even better example would be using examples where the Black male students actually owned the bank or the

accounting firms. Teachers speak possibility in the lives of students when they declare: “You can do this, son!” “You know this information. Take a minute and tell me the answer, son.” Speaking possibility into students’ lives and empowering students to speak possibility into their own and their classmates’ lives is critical to next level education for Black male students. Of course, next level education cannot be achieved if teachers do not care about the students and the students do not care about themselves and their teachers.

Caring and Demonstrating Care

Teachers often talk about their care for students across school contexts. It is clear in the literature that having caring teachers is essential for all students, and especially students in urban classrooms (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1990; Noddings, 1992). However, although *saying* that one cares about another is important, *demonstrating* that care is completely more important. Teachers’ care should be demonstrated in what they actually do, in addition to what they say. In describing some common characteristics of care among the 13 teachers in his study, Brown (2003) reported:

These 13 urban teachers create caring classroom communities by *showing* a genuine interest in each student. They gain student cooperation by being assertive through the use of explicitly stated expectations for appropriate student behavior and academic growth. (p. 282, emphasis added)

The teachers in Brown’s study actually *showed* interest in the students. In my research, teachers demonstrated their care by offering students compliments on what they were wearing, by allowing students to do make-up work and extra credit at the end of the school term when students were at risk of receiving a failing grade, by volunteering to serve as sponsors/advisers to clubs and organizations, and by actually attending after-school activities (such as basketball games) even when the teachers were not on duty or serving as coaches for the team. One student reported that one of his teachers “never missed” his basketball games,

and the relationship between the two was one that clearly demonstrated, through my observations, the reciprocal nature of care.

Indeed, care and the demonstration of that care are critical to the success of Black male students in urban classrooms. Irvine (2003) explained that teaching is about establishing and maintaining caring relationships, and it is about what Collins (1991) called *other mothering*, and I add *other fathering*. In other words, teachers should want for their Black male students the same kinds of opportunities and lifestyles that they aspire for their own biological children.

Thus, caring teachers do not adopt approaches that do not push their students—high expectations (Siddle-Walker, 1996) are necessary to help the students emancipate themselves and to move beyond their current situations. And next level education is not possible without a mindset to do something (perhaps differently) about the situation of Black male students.

Changing the Mind, Changing the Actions

Until those of us in education change our negative thinking about Black males, we will likely find ourselves continuing on a road of failure where Black males in urban schools are concerned. Entrenched in some teachers’ thinking (often subconsciously) are stereotypes and misconceptions about Black males that prevent teachers from providing the best learning opportunities for students. In short, if teachers believe Black males are destined for failure and apathy, their pedagogies will be saturated with low expectations; teachers will be unwilling to prepare for their courses and unwilling to provide Black male students in urban schools with the best. In essence, teachers often think about Black male students through *deficit* lenses. Deficit thinking and beliefs result in inaccurate, incorrect, and harmful perceptions of Black students. Ford and Grantham (2003) maintained that:

the under-representation of diverse students in gifted education is primarily a function of educators holding a deficit perspective about diverse students. Deficit thinking exists when educators

hold negative, stereotypic and counterproductive views about culturally diverse students and lower their expectations of these students accordingly. (p. 217)

Deficit thoughts and beliefs may cause teachers to lower their expectations for Black male students because teachers have preconceived notions about these students' potential and ability. The beliefs and thoughts might emerge from conversations teachers have had about Black male students in the teachers' lounge, the historical perceptions that the country and the world have held about Black male students, or even teachers' analysis of standardized/high stake test data. 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 to the success of Black male students and their teachers.

Similarly, Black male students need to change their negative perceptions and views of themselves. Many Black males have been what I called kidnapped into believing that they are inferior and unable to succeed in school. They have been deceived about the possibilities of their lives, especially educationally. They need to develop positive images of themselves before they will be able to realize how valuable they are and how bright their future can be. Such transformation, for teachers and students, starts in the mind (in our thinking). If teachers think and come to believe that their teaching cannot be improved with Black students, their pedagogical practices will not likely improve.

Conclusions and Importance

Focusing on Black males in urban classrooms may be one of the most important research agendas in education currently. Black male students can and do succeed in every type of school across the world. Their success in urban schools is not an exception. There are committed, confident, and competent teachers who care about these students and their success. And these teachers

come from various ethnic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

I have sat and observed in a seventh grade science classroom in an urban middle school where there were some 12 Black males in attendance. I was fascinated by the level of engagement I observed from the students. Their hands were the first to be raised when a question was posed; these Black male students offered thoughtful, well-conceived responses to the discussion about rocks that lasted for 40 minutes. I could not help but wonder why data suggest that Black male students do not achieve in science, especially when they reach high school. The time has come to end the excuses; we must teach, empower, and educate Black male students and take education to the next level.

Notes

¹I use the terms African American and Black interchangeably throughout this article.

²Throughout this article, I invoke personal narratives, mostly counternarratives, to help elucidate the issues discussed. I admit that this topic is of grave importance to me, and I am willing to share features of myself and my life to help explain the intricacies and complexities of educating and empowering Black male students in urban schools. Although I draw from some of my research in an urban middle school, I believe many of the promising principles that I share transfer into elementary and high school environments.

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