

The Academic Achievement and Social Success of Black Males at Select Middle Schools in Bermuda

John E. Duncan PhD

Abstract

This article examines the factors that facilitate and impede the academic achievement and social success of Black males in middle schools in the Bermuda Public Education System. Over the past decade, marginalisation, victimisation, and stigmatisation of this population have resulted in subpar academic and social success during adolescence. Fifty per cent of Black males fail to graduate from high school. It is imperative to heighten stakeholder awareness to ensure Black males are provided with educational and social opportunities that foster academic and social outcomes. Such opportunities will provide transferable skills to enable Black males to compete in the global market and to make meaningful contributions.

KEY WORDS: *academic (under)achievement, Bermudian Black males, marginalisation, middle school, peers, social success*

Introduction

For centuries, best practice has dictated that educators provide a classroom environment conducive to the academic proficiency and social success of students. Currently in Bermuda, there is a looming crisis among the Black male student population at the middle school level. Many Black males in the Bermuda Public Education system have been marginalised. As a result, they lack the requisite academic skills to matriculate from high school successfully (Mincy 2007). The marginalisation of this population has resulted in the widening of the achievement gap between Black males and their same-aged peers.

In 2007, Dr Ronald Mincy conducted a study that indicated that 50 per cent of Black males who enroll in high school fail to graduate. This statistical revelation is problematic, as Bermuda has witnessed an increase in crime, an expansion in its gang culture, and an escalation in incarceration that is adversely affecting many Black males. The ubiquitous marginalisation of Black males is significant, as the adolescent years are a challenging transitional period in their development.

Methodology

Data were collected using a qualitative phenomenological research design. A total of 60 participants contributed to the study. School personnel (two middle school principals and one school administrator) were involved in formal interviews and 13 middle school teachers, 37 Black male middle school students, and 7 Black adult males from the community participated in focus groups. Data sources were analysed using the Glasser and Strauss Method (1967, 1994). This method entails examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising data to obtain central themes. Triangulation of data was formed as evidenced by interviews with school personnel, Black male middle school students from M1, M2 and M3, and Black male adults in the community.

Findings

The following major findings were revealed:

1. School personnel perceived peer pressure, internal and external distractions, domestic disengagement and insufficient role models as factors that impede the academic achievement and social success of Black males.
2. Black males perceived unfair categorisation and treatment, internal and external interferences, an apathetic learning environment, and disregard for learners' needs as factors that impede their academic achievement and social success.
3. School personnel reported that factors such as parental support, purposeful engagement, valuing education, and teacher-student bonding facilitated the academic achievement and social success of Black males.
4. Black males reported that extracurricular opportunities, positive influences, support systems, and high expectations were factors that facilitated their academic achievement and social success.
5. Black males defined success as the attainment of personal goals: (a) obtaining a lavish house (b) acquiring good health (c) cultivating a spiritual foundation (d) possessing a satisfying family life, and (e) enjoying an overall quality of life that makes them happy.

Why focus on Black males?

The academic achievement and social success of Black males were worthy of examination because many African-American boys lag behind their peers in the classroom by the time they reach 4th grade (Fremon and Hamilton 1997). From the outset, education was structured to prevent Blacks from receiving an optimum education, as people would generally pacify Africans with an education that allowed them to acquire minimum-level vocational skills (Hilliard 1998). Unfortunately, the achievement gap Black males experience in the United States is comparable to the achievement gap for Black males in Bermuda. A survey on adult literacy and life skills by the Department of Statistics in Bermuda, as reported by Mincy (2007), indicated that the literacy and numeracy skills of Black males between the ages of 16 and 30 fell below the minimum standard. This research is significant, as the educational inequities in graduation rates and the achievement gaps impacting Black males are national and pervasive (Jackson 2008).

Education researchers, psychologists, criminologists, sociologists, and economists have attempted to keep the study of Black males isolated within a specific discipline. Unfortunately, research suggests that it is difficult to study one phenomenon (such as Black male achievement in middle school) without taking into account the fact that Black males are experiencing challenges in all aspects of society (Roach 2011). The Schott Report on Public Education and Black Males (Jackson 2008) indicated that Black males have been systematically at a disadvantage in terms of their social, economic, and educational status. Additionally, they are likely to attend the most segregated and least resourced public schools.

According to the prison statistics of the Bermuda Police Service, approximately 98 per cent of Bermuda's prison inmates are Black. The average age of incarceration is 35 years, and incarcerations cost the Bermudian public an estimated \$50,000 per annum per inmate. Jack Harris, the founder and director of the Christian Ministry Fellowship in Bermuda, indicates that inequity is one of the fundamental reasons that many Black males turn to crime and engage in anti-social behaviours. Harris (2009) indicates that Black males fundamentally believe that a dichotomy exists in the academic and social opportunities afforded them, as compared with their peers. Consequently, this perception inexorably obstructs their social success in society.

The perpetual concern about the academic and social development of Black males is a worldwide phenomenon

(Noguera 2002; Kinjufu 2009). In 1993, a voluminous study on the socialisation of Black males was conducted in Jamaica. “This study emerged out of a deep concern that males were being marginalised, especially in the education system” (Gayle 2001: 13). According to Gayle (2001), although this marginalisation is a perpetual issue, research into it has been inconsistent. The marginalisation of adolescents in Jamaica is systemic and structural. Evans (1999) discovered that “boys had different needs than girls in the Jamaican school system” (Evans 1999: 57). Gayle (2001) highlights that Jamaican schools have not been male-friendly and the data collected by the University of the West Indies from 1990 to 1998 substantiate the conclusion that “Jamaican schools have failed our boys” (Evans 1999: 57). Evans indicated that adolescent Black males in Jamaica are marginalised and discriminated against in school in numerous ways, including:

1. Teacher-student interaction
2. Gender stereotyping of behaviour
3. Academic expectation
4. Corporal punishment
5. Curriculum design
6. Methods of teaching

From his research, Parry (1996) discovered that Black adolescent males in Jamaica displayed “an anti-academic sex/gender identity which was not felt to be compatible with either diligent study or good grades.” Parry indicated that both teachers and boys viewed masculinity as incompatible with academic achievement as “education is not macho and is dismissed by male students as effeminate and ‘nerdish’” (Parry 1996: 59).

In a study conducted by Duncan (2012) in Bermuda, unfair categorisation and treatment had an adverse impact on how Black males engaged in the classroom at middle school level. Black male students from middle school A and middle school B reported incidents of bullying that culminated in fighting and led to suspension. In addition, they admitted that they disliked being pulled from their “regular” classrooms to attend special classes because they felt self-conscious about their academic propensity to learn. The majority of Black adult males from the community also reported that they were often taunted for aspiring to be “bright.” As a result of this ill treatment, they were labelled with names such as a “geek” or “nerd.” These labels fostered inconsistencies in their academic studies and much social discomfort. According to Kunjufu (2009), failure to understand the cultural and developmental needs of Black children is the problem. He further substantiates Parry’s observation that public schools have failed African-American males, as well as males of other races and ethnic groups.

In 2009, Dr Chris Spence, director of education for the Toronto District School Board, revealed that Black males were at the forefront of all negative aspects of schooling. He indicated that over the last six decades, six Black males had entered prison for every Black male enrolled in college in the United States. Additionally, it is predicted that by 2020, 65 per cent of African-Americans between the ages of 20 and 29 will be involved with the criminal justice system. According to Goldstein (2008), 40 per cent of Canadian youth in Toronto do not graduate from high school. Codjoe (2006) attributes this disparity in academic achievement between Black students and their peers to systemic racism in Canadian society. Dr Spence (2009) indicates that Black males are most likely to be suspended and expelled, drop out of school, be placed in special education programmes, be under-represented among school personnel, and be missing from gifted and advanced placement programmes.

“To say that black males are performing poorly in school is a gross understatement” (Whitaker 1991: 17). This pervasive trend has global implications. Weathersby (2007) argues that the marginalisation of Black males has extended to countries outside the United States, including Canada, the UK, Jamaica, South Africa, and Brazil. It is on this premise that Weathersby contends that stakeholders should not solely discuss strategies to address the

current academic and social plight of Black males, but must implement, execute and evaluate these programmes to ensure sustainability over time.

Black males and learning in the classroom setting

The social success of Black males is contingent on the support structures provided for them. Black males experience social success differently from other ethnic groups, because individuals from African-American backgrounds are more prone to jeers, discrimination, and unfair treatment (Morris 2007). Current research emphasises that mentoring programmes and positive role models are significant in facilitating the positive growth and development of Black males (Bell 2010). In some cases, Black males are unable to execute simple tasks such as raising their hands to be acknowledged or following the directions of the classroom teacher. Therefore, they are often negatively labelled as displaying behavioural challenges. Duncan (2012) suggests that Black males must disassociate themselves from disruptive behaviours that place them at risk academically in the classroom.

According to Thompson and Lewis (2005), motivating Black males in middle school is a critical issue. During early adolescence, many Black males find the content in the classroom uninteresting, and as a result, they are often disengaged. Duncan (2012) conducted a study of Black male students at two middle schools in Bermuda (at M1, M2 and M3 grade levels), and Black adult males who were employed in the Bermudian workforce. The data revealed that 78 per cent of Black male middle school students identified an apathetic learning environment as a factor that adversely affected their academic performance. This study by Duncan (2012) further indicated that 29 per cent of Black adult males reported an apathetic classroom environment as prohibiting their academic success. The statistical difference between Black male students at the middle school level (78 per cent) and Black adult males (29 per cent) denotes that instructional modalities catering to the needs of these students have not been implemented in classrooms on a consistent basis. As a result of the absence of best practices, the academic achievement and social success of Black males has deteriorated in Bermuda since the implementation of middle schools and the restructuring of senior schools in 1997.

Conclusion

Scholars and researchers universally understand that environmental and cultural dynamics have a profound influence on human behaviour (Noguera 2002: 16). Noguera (2002) contends that the processes and influences involved in framing the identities of Black males should become the core of analyses of academic performance. The academic achievement and social success of Black males is interconnected with various factors. According to Duncan (2012), to ensure that Black males in the Bermuda Public Education System reach their full potential (at the middle school level), educational stakeholders must ensure that:

1. The classroom environment promotes active engagement through communication, experiential learning, and hands-on activities that are culturally relevant;
2. Classroom teachers are sensitive, build relationships with students, and are cognisant of Black males' needs and feelings;
3. A rigorous and exploratory curriculum that caters to the diverse and unique learning needs of Black males be implemented;
4. Mentors and role models must become a viable part of Black males' academic and social development;
5. Structured sports and extra-curricular activities must be designed for Black males to develop transferable skills such as self-discipline, self-confidence, responsibility, and a work ethic;

6. There is a positive male presence in the classroom, and the school environment must be promoted to support the academic and social development of Black males

Understanding the academic achievement and social success of Black males is complex. Nuart (2008) acknowledges that a blueprint to ensure the social success of Black males does not exist. However, he emphasises how important it is for Black males to develop a positive identity, as society often devalues them through negative stereotypes. When Black males are equipped to cope with their emotions and the pressures placed upon them by society, their self-esteem and mental health will resonate positively in all situations, but most importantly in the classroom.

It is of paramount importance that the Bermuda education system engage in educational reform that will address the plight of many Black males in public schools. A more deliberate approach to addressing the academic and social success of Black males in Bermuda will undoubtedly create individuals who are equipped with the skills to make meaningful contributions to our community and world-wide. No child deserves to experience marginalisation in a classroom setting where low expectations are the norm. Instead, they should be inspired and challenged to excel in every aspect of their academic and social development. The current downgrading of Black males will only change when all stakeholders assume the power to change this situation. Educators must strategically implement policies and procedures that will eradicate the causative factors that negatively impact the advancement of Black males in our society.

References

- Bell, E.E. (2009) *Impact of self-esteem and identification with academics on the academic achievement of Black male students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Liberty University. Retrieved from Liberty University website on 06/10/14.
- Christopher, J. (2009) *A random walk through the forest: Reflections on the history of education in Bermuda from the middle of the 20th century*. Winnipeg: Hignell's Book Printing.
- Codjoe, H. (2006) The role of an affirmed black cultural identity and heritage in the academic achievement of African Canadian students. *Intercultural Education*, 17(1): 33-4.
- Counterparts (2011) *American Heritage Dictionary*. Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Duncan, J.E. (2012) *The academic achievement and social success of Black males at selected middle schools in Bermuda*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northern Caribbean University.
- Evans, H. (1999) *Gender and achievement in secondary education in Jamaica*. Working Paper Number 2. Kingston: Planning Institute of Jamaica.
- Fremon, C. and S. Hamilton (1997) Are Black schools failing Black boys? Parenting: Retrieved from <http://www.terry.uga.edu> on 16/12/14.
- Gayle, H. (2001), *Poverty and Violence: The need for a male focus in urban Jamaica*. 27-28 July. London: Foreign Press Association.
- Glasser, B.G. and A. Strauss (1967, 1994) *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hilliard, A. (1998) *SBA: The reawakening of the African mind*. Gainesville FL: Makare Publishing.
- Goldstein, H. and G. Leckie (2008) School league tables: What can they really tell us? *Significance* 5: 67-9.
- Klopfenstein, K. (2004) Beyond test scores: The impact of Black teacher role models on rigorous math-taking. *Contemporary Economics Policy* 23(3): 1-13.
- Kunjufo, J. (2009) How to improve academic achievement in African American males. Retrieved from Teachers of Color on 15/12/14.

- Mincy, R.B. (2007) *A study of employment, earnings, and educational gaps between young Bermudians and their same aged peers*. Hamilton: Columbia University School of Social Work.
- Ministry of Education. (1998) The Hopkins Report. Bermuda Ministry of Education and Development.
- Morris, A. (2007) The emasculation of the Black male. Ezine Articles. Retrieved on 12/01/15.
- Noguera, P. (1997) Reconsidering the crisis of the Black male in America. Social Justice. Retrieved from Questia Online: Cengage on 12/01/15.
- Noguera, P. (2002) The trouble with boys. The role and influence of environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African American Black males. *Urban Education*: 431-39.
- Nuart, R. (2008) Social stigma awaits kids with ADHD. 16 October. PsychoCentral.
- Parry, O. (1996) Sex, gender and school failure in Jamaica: The construction of masculinity in the Jamaican classroom. Conference on Caribbean Culture, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, 4-6 March.
- Roach, R. (2001) The Black males research agenda. Black issues in higher education. *Review of Educational Research* 18(6): 22.
- Spence, C.M. (2009) *Achieving, believing, and caring*. Ontario: Pembroke Publishers.
- Strauss, A. and J. Corbin (1994) "Grounded Theory Methodology." In N.K. and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 217-85). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Thompson, L.R. and B.F. Lewis (2005) Shooting for the stars: A case study of the mathematics achievement and career attainment of an African American male high school student. *High School Journal* 88(4): 6-18.
- Weathersby, R. (2007) America has lost a generation of Black boys. Chattanooga TN: The Chattanooga.com
- Whitaker, C. (1991) Do Black males need special schools? *Ebony* 156: 17-22.