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Adolescent Literacy Policy

Black Boys Can Write: Challenging Dominant Framings of African American Adolescent Males in Literacy Research

Marcelle Haddix

“I grew up in situations where being academically involved was considered to make you less of a man, if you were to choose it over sports or ‘the streets.’... I can proudly say that I owe everything that I am now to writing.” —Eric, an 18-year-old African American male

In the 1992 film *White Men Can't Jump*, actors Wesley Snipes, an African American male, and Woody Harrelson, a white American male, portrayed two basketball players hustling money on neighborhood courts in Los Angeles, California, USA. Their hustle involved taking advantage of a long-held belief that white men lack superior athletic performance and are therefore unable to seriously compete against African Americans on the basketball court. The two ballplayers scammed the other predominantly African American opposing team players, who inevitably avoided recruiting Harrelson's character on a deficit premise and on the unlikelihood of his being a competitive athlete. Knowing his full potential, however, the two players profited significantly from Harrelson's character's true ability to dominate on the court. It was a guaranteed hustle. Why? Because there was universal buy-in that *white men can't jump*.

I witness this same kind of dominant stereotyping and racial typecasting in my work with African American youths in community writing projects, where many of the youths I encounter have assumed the identity of *nonwriter*. When I ask students whether they consider themselves to be writers, more often than not they answer “no,” because they make an immediate connection between writing and school-sanctioned literacy practices. Writing for school is often defined by timed writing tasks for standardized exams or the demonstration of the conventions of writing, and many of the young people I work with feel inept in such tasks. In my interviews with school leaders and community members to understand the history of school failure for African American youths, particularly males, in an urban school context, I am consistently met with comments like, “African American boys don't even go to school” and “our African American boys don't know how to write.”

Yet my community writing workshops tend to be attended by more African American males than any other racial or gender group. I met Eric (all names are pseudonyms), the workshop participant quoted at the opening of this article, at a stage performance of his screenplay at a local theater. When I asked him about the role that writing plays in his life, he answered, “For me, writing is like breathing. I need it to survive.” A graduating senior who had successfully navigated the terrains of a K–12 public school system where the overall graduation rate hovers at 50% and is considerably less for African American male students, Eric's

Is it that African American boys are failing in our schools or that our schools are failing African American boys?

declaration of his identity as a writer was constructed as an anomaly or the exception.

In this column, I consider how the dominant framing of African American adolescent males—that is, the cultural ideologies and representations of what

it means to be both African American and male—intersects with literacy research, policy, and practice. To better understand and address the particular needs of African American adolescent males, simply highlighting U.S. national statistics and failing to deal with the complexity and confluence of identity categories is counterproductive. It is well documented that African American males are disproportionately placed in special education, school suspensions, and expulsions and are leading in school dropout rates, unemployment, and juvenile incarceration (Holzman, 2006). An achievement gap exists between African American males and other groups, and this is a sad but true fact.

Although consensus on how to most effectively address the needs of African American male students may not be immediately or easily determined, an overemphasis and perpetual spotlighting of the “African American male crisis” does not identify effective practices either. So, does framing the problem of educating African American males in the dominant discourse of failure and the achievement gap provide us—literacy researchers, policymakers, educators, and school leaders—with a guaranteed hustle? Does the achievement gap and discourse of failure work because there is universal buy-in that African American masculinity is analogous to intellectual prowess? How do we do the work of correcting the educative experiences of African American adolescent males without furthering the stereotypes and misrepresentations of African American masculinity?

For decades, a prominent research inquiry in the educational research community has been to uncover factors contributing to academic achievement and failure for African American youths, and in particular, African American males (see Polite & Davis, 1999).

In 1982, Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu spawned a national debate over his indictment of the United States for what he called the genocide—the deliberate and systematic destruction—of the African American male. Kunjufu (1982) argued then, as he still does, that solving the problems of African American boys now may eliminate the problems of future men. Reasons he cited for what he identified as the “fourth grade failure syndrome” (Kunjufu, 1982, p. 7) for African American boys included low teacher expectations, lack of parental involvement, peer pressure, and the lack of male teachers and role models. Noguera (2003) cited parallel reasons, pointing to the growing rates of homicides and suicides, HIV/AIDS contractions, incarcerations and convictions, infantile deaths, declining life expectancy, unemployment, poverty, and the lack of social and cultural capital.

Both Kunjufu (1982) and Noguera (2003), however, did not stop by just naming the harmful environmental and cultural forces that impede so many African American male youths’ attainment of academic and social success; they further emphasized the urgent need to devise strategies for countering these forces. Similarly, in his work on improving literacy development for African American adolescent males, Tatum (2005) stressed the centrality of the experiences and the voices of African American males in the reading classroom and in curriculum, teaching, and school leadership reform. Morrell’s (2007) work with urban youth in classrooms and communities also served as a reference point for how young people are empowered to interrogate the dominant framings of those “othered” and positioned marginally within institutions of power, such as African American adolescent males, via the use of a critical literacy framework. Both Tatum and Morrell reminded us of the importance of drawing on African American linguistic and rhetorical traditions (Ball, 1992; Lee, 1993), spoken word traditions (Fisher, 2007), and critical and hip-hop literacies (Hill, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004), legitimating intellectual traditions that are often positioned outside of or as an alternative to traditional forms of schooling.

The overrepresentation of statistical and policy reports that place African American males and their low academic performance in the center of the frame

only serves to further reify notions of failure when we fail to take up or complicate why this dominant discourse exists in the first place. In his study of how gendered and racial identities are connected to educational experiences and outcomes as exemplified in a group of African American male “traditional” high school dropouts who attended an alternative high school program, Davis (2006) asserted that the role African American boys play in the (re)making, disrupting, and reinforcing of hegemonic masculinity deserves more attention and analysis to begin to deal with the disproportionate number of African American males “in trouble” in the U.S. public school system (Ferguson, 2000). The framing of issues facing African American males within the dominant discourse of failure initiates and sustains the dehumanization and objectification of African American male subjects, positioning them as scapegoats for failed academic efforts. Instead of figuring out how to best educate African American males, the greater emphasis is on how to control them and socialize them for the educational system to the prison system pipeline, what Hale (1994) termed “incarceration education.”

Without explicit attention to how the issues surrounding the education of African American adolescent males are framed and complicated, we risk reinscribing normative and universally accepted definitions of what it means to be African American and male, to be “public enemy #1.” Is it that African American boys are failing in our schools or that our schools are failing African American boys? These are two different questions that imply different units of inquiry. The problem with the former frame (or the risk) is that it places the onus on African American boys (the individual) to achieve and fails to disrupt and challenge the structures (macro) that affect the experiences of African American males in our schools. Disrupting deficit constructions of African American adolescent males and their prowess for intellectual performance lends itself to new possibilities for literacy research, policy, and practice.

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