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Mapping Pathways to Affirmative Identities among Black Males: Instilling the Value and Importance of Education in K-12 and College Classrooms

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This auto-ethnography explores issues of invisibility and resilience within Black male academic experiences. Researchers have noted that the public educational system plays an important role in the socialization of adolescent Black males. Various researchers, educators, and advocates have argued for the pertinence of education for Black men; they cite the social, cultural, and economic benefits of education and degree attainment. This is the springboard from which I engaged in my own educational and professional pursuits. In this article, I reexamine my personal narrative and experiences teaching two different courses—at a high school and a college—that specifically focused on Black men. I use this auto-ethnography to encourage educators to (a) engage in creative ways to expand our curriculums and (b) build inclusive classrooms that diminish African American men's invisibility. The ultimate goal of this work is to contribute to ways that better connect our classrooms and institutions to Black male achievement and success.

Keywords: Black males, education, identity, pedagogical practice

> *I am invisible. Misunderstood, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or fragments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.* (Ellison, 1952/1995, p. 8)

In the preceding passage from *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's (1952/1995) novel provides a context for the ways in which he was rendered invisible within larger society. Ellison's notion of invisibility is not a self-endorsement, but rather a result of creations by others who both misunderstand and refuse to see. These descriptors provide a lens of the African American[1] experience in the United States in general and of African American

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men in particular. Another thought by Ellison amplifies this point:

> I am an invisible man. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (p. 8)

Here, the unnamed character further extolls the dialectical experience of invisibility where the possibilities of his actual being exists—in mind, body, and substance. However, the main point of contention is that his invisibility is imposed on him by others.

Conceptual / Inspirational Framework

During the past decade, African American males again emerged as a topic of interest with much concern focused on higher education. This "renewed" interest in African American males extends throughout the educational pipeline (Jackson & Moore, 2008). Jenkins (2006) asserts the trends that demand immediate attention include the underachievement, lack of inclusion, and backward progression of African American men within American society, and particularly within the educational arena. The data is not surprising when considering the secondary school performance of the same population. According to the 2012 Schott Report, Illinois is one of the 10 worst performing states in educating young Black males (47% graduation rate) and the graduation rate for Black males is slightly lower than the national average of 52% (Holzman, 2012). Even further, the identities of African American males are frequently categorized through stereotypes that include "unintelligible, uneducable, and dangerous" regardless of their degree of achievement or success (Jackson & Moore, 2006). African American males are seen first as part of a group rather than as individuals (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Moore, 2000). For example, Jackson and Moore (2008) maintained that "cool pose" and its associated social rewards:

> encourage behaviors that devalue academic achievement and depress educational aspirations while condoning activities and relationships that rebuff traditional standards of excellence" and it is a prime example of the prevalent perception that there is a crisis in the education of Black males in America. (p. 849)

Majors and Billson (1992) suggest that "cool pose" is a distinctive coping mechanism that Black males use partly to counter the dangers they face on a daily basis. They further explain that "cool pose" is a multi-dimensional survival skill and a coping strategy. Concerns regarding stereotyping, labeling, and an overarching group identity are echoed in a growing body of academic literature on Black males' education (Davis, 2003; Downey, 2008; Lopez, 2003; Mandara, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Reynolds & Burge, 2008), including a recent issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* devoted to the African American male crisis in education (Jackson & Moore, 2008).

Within my own educational journey, I weaved through fragments of cool masculinity (Majors & Billson, 1992) that also was balanced with the pull and tug of being smart at an inner-city public school (Kunjufu, 1997). Beyond my own academic experiences, my invisibility confronted me in various meetings, classrooms, and institutional spaces even as I engaged in professional activities**.** My own coping strategies and mechanisms helped me stay under the radar in high school while the institutional culture of college pressed invisibility hard upon me. I

graduated from a Chicago Public School among about 100 students that entered as 334 our freshmen year. The college I attended had just over a four percent Black student population compared to an all-Black student population in my high school. Focusing on African American communities, my academic work and research interests helped me learn about the historical experiences of Blacks and allowed me to be ever cognizant of the myriad challenges that African American men face. Reading Ellison's (1952/1995) *Invisible Man* helped me better understand my predicament. Similarly, studying the lives of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Malcolm X, as well as other contributors to the Black world, liberated me and set me on a path for self-discovery. These lives and experiences were affirming, improved my social interactions and social adjustments, and allowed me to map my own positive self-identity. Additionally, I used my academic training and desire to contribute to African American communities to pursue a career in education.

Method

The research presented here attempts to recover a sense of self and voice by re-examining various educational experiences within my life course. In an effort to achieve this, I use an auto-ethnographic method to inscribe my own experiences within the extant scholarship. Auto-ethnography is a qualitative research method that uses self-narrative to critique one's situatedness with others in social contexts and is a type of critique that identifies zones of contact of self and culture (Denzin, 1997; Neuman, 1996; Spry, 2001). Additionally, this approach seeks to understand cultural experience by analyzing personal experience (Chase, 2005). Auto-ethnography is useful for the research presented here, as it allows for writing from the "I" perspective and thereby creating space for a reflexive approach. The subjectivity of this approach allows me to write about my own choices, decisions, and experiences in ways that traditional methodological approaches do not. Auto-ethnography allows space and dialogue that potentially can instigate and shape change (Holman Jones, 2005; McIlveen, 2008). In using an auto-ethnographic method, I submit tenets of autobiography and ethnography. Given the limited space allowed for this article, careful consideration was taken in selectively choosing particular experiences to share, analyze, and critique.

In writing from my own situated standpoint, what is offered here developed as I embarked on a teaching career and my personal and professional desires to engage with African American youth, in general, and Black males, in particular, within the educational pipeline. As I prepared for and began working in education, I realized that I first had to put my own experiences in context—if I did not fully understand my own experiences then how could I attempt to understand the experiences of others who I would be responsible for teaching? My critical lens sharpened through reflective and creative writings, conversations with mentors, colleagues and friends, and targeted reading. Through continual self-examination I learned that I could not *teach* African American males if I could not *reach* African American males. In order to "reach" them, I had to reinterpret my world, better comprehend how I navigated social and academic spaces, and understand the consequences and opportunities created through various choices. In doing so, I also needed to study and learn *from* them, as well; I had to learn the ways that they were motivated, better understand their goals, and appreciate the resilience and skills that they brought into the classroom. This process has been both transformative and emancipatory. It has allowed me to make Black men more prominent in my curriculum and more

visible in my classroom. In myriad ways, they have moved from the margin to the center and I have been able to engage them in deeper and much more critical levels than I had previously.

In this brief work, I use my own professional journey and personal teaching narrative to explore the relevance of Ellison's invisibility thesis for understanding the educational experiences in working with Black males. This auto-ethnography is framed in my experiences in teaching two courses that placed Black males at the center. The first course, "African American Masculinities: An Historical Approach," was designed by me and co-taught to a group of 12th grade Black males at a Chicago public charter high school. The second course, "Brothers and Scholars," was part of the college curriculum where I taught for the academic component of an African American Male Initiative Program. Upon my hiring, I joined two other faculty members who taught the "Brothers and Scholars" course during the previous academic year. Given my educational and professional experiences, I was designated as the lead teacher for the course and I taught it independently for three semesters. In crafting the objective for both, I designed the courses to introduce students to the major psychological, sociological, historical, and cultural perspectives on Black masculine identities, paying special attention to race, ethnicity, and scholarship.

Personal / Professional Journey

Researchers have noted that the public educational system plays an important role in the socialization of adolescent Black males. For instance, Ferguson (2001) examines the ways in which gender and race stereotyping impact the schooling experiences of Black boys and their conceptions of Black masculine identity. Within the schooling context, Ferguson found biases in the reporting of and responding to school infractions, which resulted in the overrepresentation of Black boys labeled as troublemakers than are other gender or racial-ethnic groups of students. Given this finding, and other practices, many Black male students face school challenges that require high levels of awareness, persistence and resolve on their parts (see Graham & Anderson, 2008; James, 2010) in addition to efforts by faculty and staff to engage students socially and culturally (Brooms, 2014; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995; Sankofa, Hurley, Allen, & Boykin, 2005). Ferguson's findings—and those of others (i.e., Kunjufu, 2010)—allow us to consider some of the long-term impacts of schooling policies on the maturation and academic development of Black male students, especially when juxtaposed with current trends and data. According to Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006), the prospects of earning a bachelor's degree by the age of 25 for African American male Chicago Public Schools (CPS) graduates is about 3 percent. If education is needed in order to help Black men succeed, then clearly Black male CPS attendees are being underserved to a great extent.

The current state of the American public educational system has been viewed as proliferating savage inequalities and having many vestiges that easily make it a shame of the nation (Kozol, 2006, 2012). Within the recent data, 43% of the degrees presented at four-year institutions are awarded to males and 57% to females (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In general, Black males have significantly lower high school graduation rates, college attendance, and graduation rates than Black female students and still account for 14.7% of all high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Ogbu (2003) suggested that the low performance of Black students in high school has been due to inferior school resources and a lack of parent involvement. Also, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested that due to past discriminatory practices and limited educational resources, some Black students develop an

"oppositional" culture to academic achievement. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) contend that the educational playing field is not level for Black students navigating the collegiate system. In addition, "the combination of race and gender may constitute a 'double jeopardy' of sorts, further imposing barriers to the academic success of many African American males" (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008, p. 297). The data cited here and elsewhere, as well as the assertions regarding the current plight of Black males, reiterate the need for innovative, engaging, and holistic pedagogy.

On the first day of class for my "African American Masculinities" course, I arrived early and stood in the doorway. I first witnessed this technique used by Mr. Smith, a Black male who taught math at my high school.[2] I was a freshman and I did not have Mr. Smith as a teacher until my senior year. My goal for using this technique was threefold. I wanted to create my intentional presence in the classroom learning environment, I wanted to greet each student individually with a handshake as he entered the class, and it was my first step in modeling behaviors that I hoped students would emulate. I have never forgotten how Mr. Smith's presence spoke to me and I have incorporated this within my own teaching practice, as well. After distributing paper, I allotted students five minutes to complete their first writing assignment. The free-write assignment was comprised of two questions: (1) What is your image of Black men? and (2) What is your definition of Black males? The goal of this assignment was to allow these young men an opportunity to speak about the subject from their own understandings. I wanted students to offer their own images and I also wanted them to hear from their peers, as well. This activity allowed us an opportunity to discuss and interrogate their images and definitions of Black men prior to engaging in any of the readings connected to the course. After allowing time for each student to speak and recording all of the responses on the blackboard, we engaged in a discussion of their responses. The following is a representative sample of the images that students offered:

- Strong, smart
- With money, women, lost sight
- Dreads, gold teeth and wild
- Body of god, mind of a genius but most don't use it
- Selfish, angry, smart
- African descent, dark skin
- Degrading
- Dangerous, lazy, amount to nothing
- Rose that grew from concrete

Halfway through our discussion, we stopped to make another analysis of responses. As is evident in the data presented here, the majority of the images that students offered were negative. In total, five images offered were positive and 14 were negative. As the students reflected on the images and why they offered nearly three negative images to each positive one, Justin announced that, "We allow our environment to dictate our perception." Although the overwhelming majority of the responses were negative, students continuously used a critical lens to make sense of their lives. This is highlighted in two responses. Grant offered that his image of Black men was that they had, "[A] body of god [and the] mind of a genius." Here, Grant imagines Black men with the highest qualities, within which there are no barriers to their success. However, he finished his image with an analysis that asserted, "but most don't use it." Grant further explained

that Black men are incredibly talented—athletically and intellectually—however, they limit their own prominence.

Using a historical frame, I was able to demonstrate to the students some of the institutional, social, political, and economic barriers that limited many Black men from using their talent and genius. Justin offered that his image of the Black man was a “rose that grew from concrete.” During our discussion, Justin elaborated on his earlier point and noted that most Black men are born with difficult realities. Here, Justin understands the resilience that Black men enact in order to achieve, even against the odds. These realities resonated with the students in this class, as well, and these types of discussions provide fertile ground for young men to identify, learn, and share strategies that potentially can help them press forward in their current and future endeavors. Suggesting that the image of the Black man is a “rose that grew from concrete” invokes the young men’s cultural competence, agency, and voice. The rose concept was popularized by hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur’s (1999) opening poem “The Rose that Grew from Concrete,” in his poetry book of the same name. Shakur ends the poem by asserting, “Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams / it learned 2 breathe fresh air / Long live the rose that grew from concrete / when no one else even cared!” (p. 3). Duncan-Andrade (2008) used the metaphor to highlight the need for a radical transformation in our classrooms that allow our students to be celebrated and that allow them to develop critical hope to rise through and beyond the challenges they face.

The goal of the “African American Masculinities” and “Brothers and Scholars” courses was not to tell students what to think. Instead, I desired to provide Black young men with opportunities to critically analyze how they thought about Black men, thereby reflecting, critiquing, and analyzing how they thought about themselves. Tatum (2006) suggests that one way to reshape the trajectory and shore up the resilience of Black males is to provide meaningful reading material and encourage honest debate. We juxtaposed the images that students provided during the free-write with a discussion of how they wanted to be seen. Using these types of self-reflexive questions created opportunities to engage students in conversations and dialogue that lasted throughout the semester and sharpened the ways that they read through texts, articles, and other literary work used in the course. Given the student responses in this class, I also incorporated these questions into my “Brothers and Scholars” course and it yielded very similar results.

A good deal of research on the academic performance of Black male students is written from a deficit-model that focuses on the inadequacies of this student population. This view is problematic in that it places the onus of performance on Black male students without regard to structural and institutional barriers that impact their performance. More and more, recent research has focused on the motivation and high achievement of Black students. According to Grieve (2009) and Brooms (2013), a significant factor relating to educational aspirations of urban Black male high school students is support from teachers, counselors, and peers. Many Black male students do not receive adequate support and they often find themselves in hostile or indifferent school environments (Ferguson, 2001). Thus, they are completely invisible to those around them. As Ellison’s (1952/1995) protagonist notes,

> Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You

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> ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful. (p. 2)

Studies by Branch (2014), Bridges (2011), and Brooms (2013, 2014) are revelatory in exploring self-conceptions and motivations of African American students. These researchers demonstrated that many Black male students are empowered to succeed academically as a result of using racial identity as a coping strategy to persevere. For instance, Bridges asserts that self-awareness and building relationships are critical in helping Black males engage their resilience. Similarly, Branch and Brooms (2014) assert that ethnic and racial identity exploration often can enhance academic performance and achievement for Black males. These studies, along with others such as Harris (2006) and Wright (2011), contradict findings by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) who earlier argued that Black students developed an "oppositional" culture to academic achievement as a result of past discriminatory practices and limits in educational opportunities afforded to this student population.

Early in my "Brothers and Scholars" course, I engage students in creating an historical frame for analyzing the experiences of Black men by examining several legal doctrines. We begin by reviewing the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson* cases and the post-Civil War Constitutional amendments. I use this approach so that students better understand how race was socially and politically constructed and to reveal the legal ramifications of racial identity in the mid- to late 19th century United States. We follow this by comparing and contrasting the philosophical and political ideologies of Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. In one writing assignment, students responded to the question raised by Du Bois (1903/2005) in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Michael's response captured the spirit of the class, as he argued,

> To me the question is rhetorical. Someone telling or asking me how does it feel to be a problem is almost like calling me a statistic. Every Black person is not a problem. Society put this tag on people from birth… Telling a person he is a problem makes him feel like one.

Michael's analysis reframes the question presented in Du Bois' work as the problem itself. Further, Michael's interpretation can be read in the ways in which others have problematized Black males and Black masculinities. Du Bois (1903/2005) retorts that he seldom offered a word to the question; he acknowledges, "And yet, being a problem is a strange experience—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else" (p. 1). Michael presents the same point in his analysis by suggesting that Black men have been targeted. With this view, the students continued their analysis and Jared personalized the question by flipping the script in a positive frame as he offers, "If getting an education is a problem then I am a problem." Jared's point speaks to the ways in which African American young men actively situate themselves within contemporary narratives by eliciting ways they wish to be seen. Jared's assertion also speaks to the challenges that many urban African American young men face in focusing on their academics (Harper & Davis, 2012; Harris, 2006).

In reading Du Bois' "The Talented Tenth," students are assigned guided reading questions to assist with close reading of the text. Students also are required to select one passage

that they found most powerful and provide justification for their choice. Malcolm chose the following passage,

> But not even this was able to crush all manhood and chastity and aspiration from Black folk. A saving remnant continually survives and persists, continually aspires, continually shows itself in thrift and ability and character. Exceptional it is to be sure, but this is its chiefest promise; it shows the capability of Negro blood, the promise of Black men (Du Bois, 1903/2005, p. 1).

In his justification, Malcolm noted that there are three ways that African Americans can be kept under control: physically, mentally, and spiritually. He asserts that being controlled mentally is the worst way that you can be controlled, but Black men simply need to know their own histories and understand their potential. His selection and inclusion of "the promise of Black men" also connects with the "body of god, mind of genius" image that the young men offered in the "African American Masculinities" course.

In my "African American Masculinities" course, students acknowledged that they had heard of some of the people that we covered, such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Thurgood Marshall. We take an in-depth examination and comparative analysis of Martin and Malcolm. They assert that both men exhibited desirable characteristics, but Nate believed that Malcolm X set the standard for Black men. Nate offered that,

> Malcolm expressed himself about many issues but I feel that these are the most important. When I think about masculinity I visualize Malcolm X. Why? Because he is the true meaning of the word 'it's never too late' and if he can elevate his mind as well as himself for the better of his self then anyone can.

We also examine the lives of lesser-known individuals such as Norbert Rillieux, William C. Neil, and Laurence C. Jones in addition to investigating David Walker, the Scottsboro Boys, and the Black Panther Party. The discussions were robust; students engaged me in conversations during their lunch hour, continued conversations after class, and, in general, wanted to know more. During the second half of the course, students have a better understanding of Black Nationalism and write about several of its philosophical tenets. Our examination of Paul Robeson allows for a conversation about creating a personal standard of excellence, navigating educational and social spaces, and being a scholar-athlete. Each student in the class had participated in at least one season of a sport and half of the young men were current members of varsity athletic teams. Studying Robeson provided an opportunity to engage the young men regarding the ways in which they could use sports to create future opportunities for themselves. Edwin offered the following,

> So in order to help our race we need more Black doctors, Black lawyers, more Black people in the business area and in corporate areas, and more Black billionaires. The basketball court and football field is not the only way out. Education can take you places that would surprise you. Learn about your history and this world would put a different perspective in your mind.

Throughout the course of the semester in each of these classes, the young men begin to re-envision their images of Black men. They verbalize a sense of connectedness to the men that came before them and an appreciation, as well. Additionally, in learning about the ways in which Black men have overcome the odds historically, these young men are provided with exemplars of triumph, success, and resilience that they can incorporate into their own lives.

In one of his reflections near the end of the semester, Bryan follows his revised definition of African American men with this statement,

> African American masculinity teaches us about Black history and makes us think critical[ly] and analytical[ly]. The image "I am a man" symbolizes the pain and hardship of Black men and how they had to fight just to be thought of as a man. Many Black men did not give up; they knew it would be a challenge and they knew that the change was near.

The perception of Black male invisibility is a dual process whereby students believe that Black men are underappreciated in general and that they are unseen individually. And, in some regards, many teachers and educational institutions neglect to adhere to the needs of this student population. As such, institutional forces impact students in the ways they engage in classrooms, choose classes and majors, and are posited as "outsiders" in many institutional settings. In this vein, Black males are considered less likely to achieve and often disengage from campus-wide activities. I used my "African American Masculinities" and "Brothers and Scholars" courses to tap into the students' racial and gender identities and ideologies. The "invisibility syndrome" takes the form of a struggle with inner feelings and beliefs that personal talents, abilities, and character are not acknowledged or valued by others, nor by the larger society, because of racial prejudice (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000, p. 33). As they hear voices and stories that resonate with their own lived experiences, Black young men can become more visible in our classrooms, develop resiliency traits that allow them to navigate challenging academic settings, and reaffirm their self-identity (see Branch, 2014; Bridges, 2011; Brooms, 2014; Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, & Bagley, 2014; Whiting, 2006).

As they continued to engage with critical text, participate in robust conversations, and reflect on their own experiences, the young men further developed their intellectual acumen. Additionally, the students' comments and writings were more critically salient as the semester progressed. In the end, they defined Black men in the following ways: proving society wrong, strong mentally and physically, intelligent, versatile, and survivor. Extended versions include the following,

> Being your own man, standing up for what you believe in a hundred percent, being a father and doing any and everything the right way to support your family and solidarity is the characteristics of a true Black man. – David

> Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Thurmond Marshall, Black Panthers Party, Huey Newton, Bobby Seal, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois and other important leaders have given their lives and have spoken on the behalf of all Black men and women. These unbelievable people have pushed their minds to understand more than just logic, but how the world works. They have been educated by institutions and also have educated themselves. – Rodney

> In today's society I feel as if Black people as a whole don't celebrate our Black leaders enough who have brought us where we are today. Many young people don't even know their history. – Deante

> Great leaders have fought for a change and it would only seem right if we continue to fight for that same change. – Andre

On a final note in ending the class, Clarence offered:

> Strong black men keep coming and will continue to come now and in the future. Throughout the previous years black men have faced discrimination, racism, and many more obstacles; but us as a race has [sic] knocked down many barriers and young intelligent black men keep coming and changing history in many ways. Life is hard, but it's always improvement for change and change can change others. Young black men should know that change can come but only if you make it happen. Self-determination and being self-motivated can alter your life in unbelievable ways. You can become a part of history but only if you let it happen, so make a change.

Consistent with extant literature, Black males must be engaged in an atmosphere in which their contributions are placed within a historical perspective. In addition to being engaged in meaningful groups and organizations, it is critical for these students to be presented with academic and social support, positive images, and role models. Additionally, they must be connected with their rich history of significant contributions within their classroom settings (see Branch, 2014; Bridges, 2011; Brooms, 2014; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Toldson, 2011).

Self-reflection is a critical tool to better understand one's own experiences, it helps you connect with others and provides a window for others to "see" and reflect as well. Much of what the young men shared, learned, and gained in these classes was linked closely to their ability to see themselves in multiple narratives and what they found relevant about the subject matter. Engaging students socially and culturally provides fertile ground to tap into their identities, aspirations, and potential (Gay, 2000; Mitchell & Stewart, 2012). We must continue to empower our Black young men through positive learning experiences that move them from the margin to the center. We must allow multiple and various opportunities for self-reflection and critical analysis. How can we build strong relationships with students and make a definitive imprint on their lives if we do not allow their voices and stories to be heard and made visible? In response to how they wanted to be seen, the young men in my courses primarily desired not to be seen as a stereotype or through a stereotypical lens. They want to be seen as smart, role models, family men, and, despite all of the struggles and specifically because of their efforts, these Black young men want to be seen as successful—or, at least on the path to success. For these students, they see and define Black men as leaders and overcomers.

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Recommendations for Personal/Professional Transformative Practice

Expanding our Curriculums

The historic narrative of Blacks focuses on triumph and the stride toward freedom. To illuminate this, students must be engaged with critical texts that focus on experiences that resonate with their own. As noted earlier, African American males have again emerged as a topic of interest—and much concern—in education. Expanding our curriculums allows educators to tap into a wide range of the cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives of Black males. According to Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1992), culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on those elements of cultural socialization that most directly affect learning. Consequently, culturally responsive teaching can be considered transformative, as "it recognizes the existing strengths and accomplishments of these students and then enhances them further in the instructional process" (Gay, 2000, p. 33) and emancipatory, "in that it releases the intellect of students of color from the constraining manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing" (Gay, 2000, p. 35). Finally, cooperation, community, and connectedness are also central features of culturally responsive teaching, which fits very neatly within this specific focus. It is important that we always recognize the numerous positive qualities and abilities our students possess.

Build Inclusive Classrooms with Intentionality

The identities of African American males are frequently categorized through stereotypes that include *unintelligible, uneducable,* and *dangerous* regardless of their degree of achievement or success. These projections limit opportunities for Black males to engage in classrooms and very often render them invisible. Researchers note that many Black students must cope with school environments that present significant challenges to their persisting toward graduation (Branch, 2014; Carter, 2007; Harper & Associates, 2014; Milner, 2007). In an effort to alleviate these challenges, educators and institutions need to build inclusive classrooms. In doing so, they also create opportunities to engage the whole range of their student populations intentionally. As evidenced from the "African American Masculinities" and "Brothers and Scholars" courses presented here, and many other examples elsewhere, Black males can achieve when their presence is included in positive ways. The successes of Black male students will continue to rely on academic and social support, positive images, and role models at all stages of their educational careers.

Build the Intellectual Repertoire of Black Males: Toward Self-Education

In our quest to educate Black males, we must assist them on their paths toward self-education. I strongly encourage Black males to set themselves on a path to success by creating a few action steps. There are many people who have made contributions here, so this is not a reinvention. What is offered here is for consideration and intended to build momentum:

1. Develop or get a hold of a reading list. This is a start, not an end. Once you have secured a reading list, begin to engage with the readings and talk to others so that your list develops and speaks to your own interests as well. And, when you read, be sure to

discuss what you have read with others so that you sharpen your own perspective and understanding.

2. Let reading become a lifelong habit. The greatest thing about reading is that you can do it at any time. I have read while waiting on a bus, riding in a vehicle, sitting in the doctor's office, and while waiting at the train station. I make it a habit to keep a book (and notepad) in my book bag and I keep at least one book in my car as well. I look for moments throughout the day to read and, when none present themselves, I just take time out to read something.
3. Read and study about subjects that are central to who you are and that you enjoy. When you find pleasure in doing a particular activity, very rarely will it feel like work and it is easy to keep it incorporated into your daily routine.

In my adult life, the importance of reading has been reinforced during my graduate studies and in my role as an educator, athletic coach, and administrator. As I have increased the frequency and sincerity of my reading, I keep constant notes of ideas and concepts that speak to me. I remember sitting on the floor in the library at Clark Atlanta University when I was first introduced to Dr. Carter G. Woodson's "Mis-Education of the Negro." In his writing, Dr. Woodson informs us that,

> When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (Woodson, 1933/2011, p. 2)

In this book, I found true motivation for my own education—which I understood as self-discovery and empowerment. Our opportunities to learn are endless. We must be sure that we are feeding our minds and bodies with rich texts and literatures that speak to our experiences.

Concluding Statement: Why We Can't Wait

The current wave of recent data on the plight of Black male performance in education reiterates the urgency of now. The research cited within this paper are clear indicators as to why young Black males must seize the educational opportunities afforded to them and points to the necessity of creating learning environments that allow for all students' identities to be affirmed. The need for Black young men to perform academically is crucial to our families, communities, and wider society as well. By examining and learning from our elders, we come to understand that no challenge is too great to overcome. We have a plethora of examples of individuals overcoming the odds set before them. In like fashion, we must see education as a bastion for a better tomorrow; for, as Malcolm X has noted, it is our passport to the future.

Education has proven to be a great elevator for Blacks; in fact, education has a transformative power that liberates us from our former selves and allows us to create ourselves anew. We must consider how our race, gender, class, environment, and other social identities and locations matter in determining how we are treated, our educational experiences, and what is expected of us. To see this point a little more clearly, consider Baldwin's (1963/1992) assertion in a letter to his nephew:

> This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born, and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. (p. 7)

Our Black young men acknowledge the challenges set before them and they aspire to achieve at the highest levels. We must be committed to creating spaces and opportunities for them to explore and learn from their histories.

Postscript

moving forward
for young Black men who continue
to press forward, even against the odds
by dbrooms

be determined/ not turning away
wanting you to live on purpose
take our history back
capitalize Black
create new visions of man
be willing to sit-in and stand
make marches in your mind
we need more time
finish like the Little Rock nine
aint nothing wrong with the aim
create successes to claim
lift your veil
decide which mountains to tell
study y/our history and
shine the lights of your beautiful Black soul
let your dreams go and unfold
and be, exist and live
on purpose
being sure to love self

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Notes

1. I use the terms "Black" and "African American" interchangeably.

2. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of individuals represented within this research.

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