# "I'm Trying to Get My A": Black Male Achievers Talk About Race, School and Achievement

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**Abstract** This study seeks to challenge deficit views on Black male education by highlighting the perspectives of academically successful Black males in a secondary school setting. Employing interpretive qualitative methods, I present the narratives of academically successful Black males, emphasizing their reflections on race, school and academic achievement. In particular, this study highlights the educational dispositions and expectations of Black males, including the influences of their support systems on their academic trajectories. One support system comprised of parents, including the academic expectations held of their sons as well as their racial socializing practices. Another support system included their teachers, particularly those who demonstrated pedagogical, expectation and relational characteristics seen as enabling Black male success.

**Keywords** Black males · Race · Achievement · Anti-deficit · Parents · Teachers

> Were the problems of confronting Black males regarded as an "American" problem, meaning an issue like cancer or global warming that must be taken on by the entire society in order to be addressed, the plight of Black males would be a subject that policymakers and research centers would embrace in an effort to find ways to reduce and ameliorate the hardships (Noguera 2008, p. xviii).

The lack of national urgency in addressing the plight of Black males that Noguera speaks of points to the dilemma of how the lived experience of Black men is perceived by the larger society, as a personal or cultural problem that rests solely on the Black "other" to address. In reality, the problems Black males encounter

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reflect the symptoms of a greater American problem, which is the unrealized promise of social equality protected under the law.

Statistics on the overall quality of life for Black men demonstrate these unrealized promises. Black men are least likely to be hired, first to be laid off, and experience high unemployment rates (Couch and Fairlie 2010; Hoffman et al. 2003; Labor 2013; Wilkinson 1999). They experience vast income inequalities compared to their White male counterparts regardless of class standing (Hamilton et al. 2011; Hoffman et al. 2003). Black men are treated exceedingly different in the judicial system, as evidenced by disproportional arrests, convictions and jail sentences (Mauer 1999; Weatherbee 2006), as well as harsher sentences than White males for the same offense (Bushway and Piehl 2001; Commision 2012; Mustard 2001).

It is conceivable that the societal impediments that Black men face are continuations of their experiences in schools. Educational statistics on Black male achievement are similarly problematic and seem to be predictors of some of the aforementioned social outcomes (Ayers et al. 2001; Noguera 2003a; Voelkl et al. 1999). Describing the dilemmas of academic achievement gaps and low matriculation rates from high school through college, the literature on Black male education paints a complex picture of Black male educational failure. In many cases, these explanations rely on and perpetuate deficit views of Black male culture, that erroneously portray Black males as lacking normative intellectual and behavioral qualities needed to be successful (Fordham 1988; Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Ogbu 1987). Less attention is given to understanding the factors and systems contributing to Black male success.

There appears to be a shift in the academic discourse on Black males, moving away from deficit views on Black male academic identity to anti-deficit or asset approaches (Graham and Anderson 2008; Harper 2008, 2012; Horvat and O'Connor 2006; Hrabowski et al. 1998; Wilson et al. 2013; Wright 2011). The present study is consistent with this shift, examining the interplay of factors leading to academic achievement for Black males through counter-narratives of academically successful Black males and their families. In the proceeding sections I provide a brief review of the relevant literature pertaining to Black male achievement, focusing on common structural and cultural explanations including the deficit views of Black male culture this study seeks to counter. An overview of the qualitative research methods will be reviewed, followed by an examination of the study findings. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the research implications.

## Literature Review

The current literature provides many reasons for the underachievement of Black males in education; some of which are explained as a result of structural processes while others are explained as effects of cultural socialization. In this brief review of the literature I will cover both structural and cultural explanations, providing critiques where necessary and highlighting the importance of research that examines the role of human agency.

Structural Barriers

Prominent structural explanations for Black male underachievement arise from the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976, 2002), who describe the social stratifying nature of schools. Through inequitably funded public schools, and the sorting of students based on academic ability, schools greatly influence the trajectory of students into stratified career, economic and social roles. And though legalized racial segregation in schools is unlawful, *de facto* school segregation based on class standing (and thus race) allows school systems to act as "neutral" institutions while maintaining racial inequalities through vastly under-resourced schools (Dixson and Rousseau 2006; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006; Orfield and Lee 2007b). The current state of raced and classed school segregation creates poor educational opportunities for Black men, effectuating poor economic and social opportunities.

Some of the responses by Black males to such poor economic and social opportunities, such as joblessness, poverty, and violence are then used as powerful forms of Black masculine representation, as media discourse and sensationalization often contribute to the negative imagery of Black men as deviant, irresponsible and uneducable. It follows that this discourse and popular ideas of Black male deviancy spill over into the schools, influencing how Black boys are perceived and treated by others. For example, teachers of Black males regularly interpret the behaviors of Black boys as aggressive, disrespectful, defiant, and intimidating even when their behaviors were not intended to be so (Davis 2003; Ferguson 2000, 2005; Monroe 2005). The imprecise interpretation of these behaviors results in discipline that is often unnecessary, unfair, and in many cases, harsher for Black boys than it would be for their White counterparts (Monroe 2005; Skiba 2001). It is plausible that these misinterpretations result from cultural incongruences. Black male students are largely taught by a predominantly White, female teacher workforce (Coopersmith 2009). Nevertheless, a consequence of behavioral misinterpretations finds Black males overrepresented in school suspensions and expulsions reducing their exposure to meaningful learning opportunities (Aud et al. 2010; Gregory et al. 2010; Skiba et al. 2002).

Limited access to equitable schools and a high incidence of encounters with school discipline exemplify the ways in which schools construct Black masculinities and negatively impact academic achievement of Black males. The mystique of Black males that produces the fear and intimidation many teachers use to justify excessive discipline also produces similar racist assumptions about Black male intelligence and academic capability. Teacher bias frequently manifests itself in low expectations of their Black male students leading to overrepresentations in remedial and special education programs and underrepresentations in gifted and college preparatory programs (Allen 2013b; Banks 1995; Council 2002; Grantham 2004a, b; Harry and Klingner 2006; Oaks 1985; Vincent et al. 2012). In addition to their complicity in a racialized tracking system, teachers frequently employ culturally unresponsive instructional strategies and curriculum (Blanchett 2006; Noguera 2003b). All of these structural barriers diminish true educational equity and greatly impact Black male achievement.

Cultural Barriers

Structural explanations for Black male underachievement are compelling, though other explanations of Black male academic outcomes emphasize the cultural responses to structural barriers. Some explanations focus on the Black family, particularly the role of undereducated parents and poverty culture (Duncan et al. 1998; McLoyd 1998), single parent homes (Bankston and Caldas 1998; Barbarin and Soler 1993), parenting styles (Mandara 2006; McLoyd 1998), physical discipline (Gunnoe and Mariner 1997; McLoyd and Smith 2002), racial socialization (Caughy et al. 2002; Hughes and Chen 1999), and parental academic involvement (Ardelt and Eccles 2001; Izzo et al. 1999) in the academic underachievement of Black males. Other cultural explanations more macro in nature point to poor performance of Black males, and Black students in general, as a result of Black cultural resistance and distrust towards social institutions such as schools.

Influential to this explanation is the work of Ogbu (1987, 1998, 2003, 2004) and Fordham (1996), Fordham and Ogbu (1986) who along with other scholars (Irving and Hudley 2005; Moynihan 1965; Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995), underanalyze structural influences on Black student success in favor of cultural influences. Using a cultural ecological model, Ogbu explains that the awareness of White racism and limited labor market opportunities create a sense of distrust among Blacks towards institutions espousing White middle-class ideology. As an act of resistance, certain Black communities embrace a cultural identity in opposition to White identity including the behaviors, values, dispositions and styles associated with middle-class White dominant culture. Black students in particular may resist the behaviors needed to be academically successful in school such as studying in the library, participating actively in class or doing homework. Student resistance may also include opposing school ideology, teacher practices and behavioral expectations. Black students who choose to adopt White preferences, perceivably at the expense of Black solidarity, may be accused of "acting white" (Fordham 1988, 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986).

Much has been written in response to Ogbu and Fordham's arguments, including counterevidence demonstrating high Black academic efficacy and school expectations of success (Cheng and Starks 2002; Darnell-Ainsworth and Downey 1998; Horvat and O'Connor 2006). Counter arguments more structural in nature highlight the role institutional racism and academic tracking play in influencing student dispositions (see structural factors above). Still, other research explains the "acting white" theory holds true to varying degrees but that Black student responses to this accusation are highly variable and dependent on many other factors including school demographics, peer cultural dynamics, structural support, and self-efficacy (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Ford and Harris 1996; Horvat and Lewis 2003; Stinson 2011; Tyson et al. 2005). In other words, peer pressure and the accusation of "acting white" does not have a deterministic effect on academic efficacy and achievement.

Agency

Both structural and cultural explanations are still somewhat over-deterministic with one typically downplaying the other in explaining Black male achievement. Neither explanation fully develops the role of agency, that Black boys are agents in how they experience school and construct academic identity. More nuanced analyses of Black male achievement should examine how structural and cultural explanations inform each other and how Black boys operationalize their understanding of culture within institutional sites.

An analytic emphasis on Black male agency does not downplay structural conditions that create very real and material limitations to people's choices. A life of poverty severely limits educational, social and economic opportunities and strongly influences the decisions many young Black men make in order to earn a wage. Additionally, increasingly segregated schools, the disappearance of jobs to the global market, and the endemicity of racism are legitimate reasons Blacks could feel frustrated with the barriers White-controlled institutions can create. But studies have shown how students flex agency in ways that disrupt both cultural and structural formations (Carter 2008; Warren 2005; Willis 1977). For example, critical race theory scholars have shown how students of color flex agency through their educational resilience and emphasis on academic achievement as a political act of resistance against school hegemony (Brayboy 2005; Solorzano and Bernal 2001). In other words, students of color may critique schooling as a purveyor of dominant ideology and reproducer of social inequalities while concomitantly using the power of educational attainment as a vehicle for social justice (Cammarota 2004). Their academic resilience is in essence a racial and political act of resistance. Thus, a closer examination of the motivations, expectations, and intent behind Black male behaviors and approaches to school may illuminate the agency of Black males in determining their academic identity and performances of masculinity.

The present study seeks to accomplish this type of examination by highlighting the agency of Black male academic achievers and their systems of support. The influence of these systems of support, which include parents and teachers, along with student self-efficacy inspired by racial justice, were collective efforts towards Black male opportunity and provide insight into what contributes to academic success for Black males. In the next section I outline the research methodology employed in this study before examining the agency of Black male achievers.

## Methodology

### Background Information

The findings presented in this paper derive from a larger ethnographic study seeking to explore the educational experiences of Black male students in a secondary school setting. The study was conducted at Central High, a suburban school of over 2,000 students located in a large Western U.S. city. Data were collected during the 2008–2009 school year using structured, unstructured and photo elicitation

interviews (Allen 2012) along with field observations focusing on interactions between students, teachers, administrators and the effects of school policy. The larger research project included ten Black male students and their families. Teachers were also interviewed and observed, with particular attention paid to six teachers who were selected by the student participants to be interviewed. As the study's primary unit of analysis was Black males, purposive sampling (Merriam 1988; Warwick and Lininger 1975) was used to select this particular population. Selecting informants from a particular set of theoretical and intersecting categories was meaningful to how the identities of race, class, and gender influence the lived experiences of students within school structures. The data presented in this paper focuses on four students who were identified as academically successful.

Research Site and Participants

Central High School was a racially and economically diverse suburban school. At the time of data collection the student population was 29 % Black, 28 % Asian, 19 % Latino, 11 % White, and 13 % Other; almost half of the students qualified for free or reduced price lunch. Four of the Black male students were identified as academically successful. Academic success was defined by: (a) an earned cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or better, (b) enrollment in at least one Honors or Advanced Placement class, (c) on track to meet district and state-wide benchmarks for graduation (indicated through school records), (d) expressed intent in college enrollment (via surveys), and (e) identified as a high achiever by teachers and administrators (data collected through teacher and administrator interviews on each student participant) (see Table 1). While creating particular parameters for defining academic success, I also acknowledge that success may be defined in a variety of ways (e.g. engagement in extracurricular activities, community service, emotional intelligence, etc.). It is also important to note that even though these students were identified as academically successful, they were not without fault. Some of the students failed classes or were suspended for inappropriate behavior. An anti-deficit approach to studying Black males does not ignore fault but rather highlights how students can be resilient despite structural, cultural, and personal barriers.

Data Collection and Analysis

*Interviews*

The students participated in three separate structured interviews, while the parents and teachers were each formally interviewed once. Together, the interviews became multivocal interpretations (Tobin et al. 1989) of the same phenomena, and were an important source for discovering meaning behind the actions and behaviors of participants, particularly the students. Unstructured questions were used during observations and casual interactions with the participants. All structured and unstructured interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and later transcribed.

**Table 1** Student descriptors

| Student alias | Grade level | Cum. GPA | AP/honors classes | Parent alias |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Jamal Baker | Sophomore | 3.64 | Yes | Mr. Baker |
| Sean Strauss | Junior | 3.91 | Yes | Mr. Strauss |
| Mark Thomas | Sophomore | 3.54 | Yes | Mr. Thomas |
| Rodney Howard | Senior | 3.49 | Yes | Mr. Howard |

## Critical Race Methodology

Since this study seeks to emphasize the agency of Black male achievers, critical race theory (CRT) provides both a conceptual framework and methodology useful to this project. As a conceptual framework, critical race theory analyzes how race and racism intersect with other identity categories (gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and experiences of subordination (sexism, homophobia, etc.) to create and maintain cultural and institutional systems of oppression. In doing so, CRT challenges dominant ideologies and popular assumptions about people of color, including meta-narrative deficit views of Black male schooling. To disrupt such meta-narratives, CRT centralizes the experiential knowledge of marginalized groups while also examining the agency and cultural wealth of people of color (Yosso 2006). Yosso (2006) defines cultural wealth as the cultural capital or the skills, knowledge, connections and abilities used by people of color as a means to fight discrimination and experience opportunity. These forms of cultural capital may include maintaining aspirations for social justice, engaging in acts of resistance against dominant ideology, or the ability to navigate social institutions, such as schools, that typically have marginalized people of color. By examining the cultural wealth of communities of color, CRT highlights the way people of color enact agency in transformative ways.

In order to understand how racism is experienced and responded to, CRT as a methodology draws upon the counter-stories or counter-narratives of people of color—accounts from people who have historically been marginalized, overlooked and unheard from. Notwithstanding, their stories are valid but are often overshadowed by majoritarian accounts that often draw upon and perpetuate deficit views of people of color (e.g. Black males resist school). By privileging these counter-stories, a CRT methodology provides critiques and disruptions to deficit-oriented dominant assumptions of various cultural groups. In this study, through participant interviews, I use counter-narratives of Black male achievers to disrupt metanarratives of Black male academic identity.

## Observations

Observations were conducted within classrooms and other school spaces and covered a range of school day and after-school activities. In the classroom, I often sat near the student and when time permitted, asked questions about certain behaviors, practices or feelings about their classroom experience. Occasionally a

teacher would ask me for help checking class work, placing my observations somewhere in the middle of the "detached" and "full participant" observational continuum (Graue and Walsh 1998). After each classroom observation I asked each teacher and student if behaviors I observed in the classroom were typical that day, toward determining if my presence and overt observations had an impact on classroom dynamics (Patton 1990). I shadowed students in hallways or during lunch (Solomon 1992; Valenzuela 1999), observing and noting the dynamics of their social groups, which provided points of reference for questions during later formal interviews.

*Analysis*

Triangulation of analysis was built into the data collection process as multiple data sources (e.g. interviews, observations, document collection, etc.) were used to confirm or disconfirm any findings (Huberman and Miles 1994; Patton 1990). Data analysis followed a qualitative interpretive approach referred to by Erickson (1986) as "modified analytic induction." Interviews and field notes were transcribed and the data corpus was read thoroughly and repeatedly to get a holistic sense of the phenomena, and Atlas.ti qualitative research software was used for coding and managing the data corpus. The data was bracketed into elements which were analyzed independently for non-contextual meaning (Denzin 1989). After coding and bracketing, the data corpus was again reviewed thoroughly to search for key linkages among the different forms of data and with a goal of developing an initial set of empirically grounded assertions. The data corpus was then reviewed again, as initial assertions were tested in light of confirming or disconfirming evidence. Assertions were then organized into major themes and subthemes, and the data was reconstructed and contextualized in light of its historical moment in time.

In addition to triangulating my data as it was collected, assertions were evaluated by identifying consistent interpretive patterns among student, parent, and teacher narratives and in field notes. Finally, I employed member-checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to obtain an additional level of validation, by asking participants for feedback on final themes identified and on my overall findings.

In the next section I present the views of Black male academic achievers regarding schooling, race and achievement. I also describe the role parent and teacher support systems play in contributing to Black male academic success.

## Purpose of Schooling and Academic Expectations

Structured interviews with the Black male achievers asked them to describe how they understood the purpose of schooling in their own lives. Their responses demonstrated a very clear understanding of the purpose of compulsory education as a means to work preparation and upward mobility. Specifically, they articulated a need to be successful in school to attend a college of choice, gain meaningful employment in a competitive market, and enjoy a middle-class lifestyle. In the following passage, Rodney explains his understanding of the purpose of schooling:

My perception of school, especially in the new age and the way things are now, is because school is so important to get a good job nowadays. You have to finish high school, you have to at least get a bachelor's degree in something to have a decent job and even more school to get you a better job. And so I see school personally as a way for educating myself, to talk a little more sophisticated. And you know, you get to interact with a lot of people that you wouldn't normally interact with in school because you're forced to…And so it will expose you to just other people, other races, other perceptions and the way people think. But I mainly think school, for me, is just a gateway to the future. A good future, a stable future.

Obtaining a formal education was understood as a must for social mobility and a "stable future." Education was also admired as a tool for personal growth and social awareness, though employment was ultimately the primary goal. They also understood the practice of doing school as preparation for life in the "real world." Jamal describes how the many responsibilities involved in doing school have real world application:

…it just gives you more preparation for like in the real world being able to juggle. Like I have to juggle, you know, all my school work with games, practices and then like off season I am trying to put in extra work and just things like that make you more responsible…I feel like I am getting a little more out of the curriculum because I'm trying to put in more. I'm trying to get my A.

Involvement in various curricular and extra-curricular activities required developing time-management strategies, which was seen as having real-world application and enhancing their overall academic experience. Evident in Rodney and Jamal's comments is that their understanding of the purpose of school, particularly the personal, social and work preparation benefits, had some influence on their own motivation to achieve, or as Jamal puts it, "get my A." They held high educational expectations but frequently spoke of how these expectations were influenced by their parents.

For the parents, educational success was a necessity and reflected a particular form of cultural wealth often displayed by communities of color (Yosso 2006). The educational expectations the parents held of their sons is what Yosso (2006) describes as aspirational capital, or the ability to maintain hopes and dreams despite racial injustice and structural inequalities (p. 176). These aspirational messages of academic success resonated clearly with the students. In some cases, the students' academic efficacy was influenced by fear of punishment they would receive for academic failure:

Mark: Elementary school I always got As and Bs. Middle school I got As and Bs. I got a 4.0 one term I think. And uh, now I am getting As and Bs. I think I've only gotten one C. It was like C+.
Researcher: So you've never failed a class, then?
Mark: No. I can't.
Researcher: Why not?

Mark: It's like…I haven't seen what they [parents], 'cause my sisters never did it and so I haven't seen what my parents would do, but I don't wanna, I don't wanna know. I'd rather just stay away from it.

Sean cosigns this concern explaining, "Um, I've had some classes where in the beginning, I wasn't quite sure if I was going to get that B out of the class, of course I don't want to be on punishment for a month."

While learning how to be academically accountable, the young men also observed differential expectations for achievement compared to their peers, noting that their parents held them to a higher standard. Rodney explains the differences saying:

Just the way that I was brought up. You know, school is really important. I never took it seriously until later but school has always been the main focus in my family and a couple of people were saying that their parents didn't really care too much about school, and it was always nice to get good grades but it wasn't necessarily like an iron fist that I had. My friends would talk about they got a C or something like that and I would kind of be like 'whoa, you got a C?' And their parents would be happy and stuff and so…

Rodney's statement illuminates variation in Black parental expectations toward education, where success may be defined differently among families. These variations, particularly the high expectations placed on students by their parents, challenge popular discourse on Black families as apathetic or uninvolved in their children's education. It is little surprise that along with high and sometimes differentiated expectations placed on their sons, parents strongly emphasized attending and completing college. Mr. Howard, the father of Rodney, explains, "with all our children our goal has always been beyond high school. The goal is at least 4 years of college if not more, but the expectation is that it doesn't end in high school. You still have 4 years to go." Similarly, when asked what his parents' educational expectation was for him, Mark quickly replied, "College. College, college, college."

## Parental Support: Racial Socialization and Resiliency

It seems the students understood and worked to satisfy the academic expectations of their parents, adopting relatively meritocratic views of schooling while attempting to use academic success as means to college attendance and social mobility. Their efficacy in school, however, was not without an understanding and critique of the role race, racism and class played in creating barriers for students of color. As I have written elsewhere (Allen 2013a) the parents of these young men were proactive in their racial socialization, providing messages of racial pride while being explicit about the barriers racism could create and emphasizing the need to be racially resilient. For example, Mr. Straus explains how he teaches his son Sean:

Sean has come home and told me some things. I said, you know, you're going to have to be bigger. One of the firm things that his mom and I teach all of our

children is, 'you know what, your teacher's got a job. You're the one who needs one and believe it or not, that teacher can prevent you from getting a good job. Don't allow anybody to hold you back. Get it for yourself.' And that's one of the advantages right now that I believe my son and my children have.

Mr. Anderson, the father of Billy, extends this same argument by saying, "for some reason, because of the color of our skin, we're looked down upon as being nothing and if we don't do something supernatural and achieve way beyond everybody else then you're never going to get out of that box." In addition to fighting school racism on behalf of their sons (Allen 2013b), the fathers worked to prepare their children for life in a society where racism is endemic (Bell 1992; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). While the fathers demonstrated aspirational capital through their academic expectations for their children, they also expected their sons to be resilient despite racial barriers, or "achieve way beyond everybody else." Through counter-stories, critical race theory research has regularly documented the ways communities of color demonstrate resilience as an act of resistance to racial hegemony (Brayboy 2005; Solorzano and Bernal 2001; Yosso 2006). The fathers prepared their sons for school based racism, using notions of racial justice as a motivator. The sons demonstrated their own agency by being resilient in the face of barriers, barriers that sometimes included teachers as gatekeepers.

These fathers' comments also point toward the stark reality for many people of color: that there is a double standard and one must go above and beyond what is expected of others to experience the same level of success. As Mr. Howard puts it, "that's the burden you have to bear. That's a part of life."

The young men understood this message and articulated their racial socialization as Black men:

Sean: Growing up I've been told like Black power and stuff like that. A Black man is supposed to be powerful because you have to be twice as better as anybody else because society will try to bring you down and stuff like that.
Researcher: Do you agree with that?
Sean: I agree with that you have to work harder than most people, although it's not fair, it's the reality. It's reality and so that part I agree with.

This type of proactive racial socialization appeared to be partly responsible for the students' self-efficacy (Allen 2013a), that their resilience should be an act of resistance to potential racial barriers. Rodney's insightful narrative best represents the notion of resiliency as resistance (Carter 2008; Freire 1998; Miron and Lauria 1998) to racial and class barriers:

Obviously certain schools will have more money to buy certain things, more resources to put things out but I think it just comes back to the student and just your willingness to try harder. And just because that person over there has the new updated textbook doesn't mean you can't try harder, get on the same level as them. So I don't necessarily see our lack of funding here as an excuse not to try hard. Where you are just satisfied with having the good stuff already, I'm going for the good stuff and better stuff. And so I feel maybe that we're doing

better here because we don't have all the things that some of the better schools can afford. It just makes us work harder. Because that's what life is going to be for minorities. We have to work hard anyway and so why not start in school?

Rodney's commentary highlights the relationship between class and race in school funding, where students of color are densely populated in underfunded and under-resourced schools (Kozol 2005; Orfield and Lee 2007a). While acknowledging the barriers of school funding, Rodney espouses a stance that emphasizes agency, arguing that school funding shouldn't be an excuse for a lack of effort. It's important, however, that his statement not be confused with popular conservative calls for personal accountability that fail to acknowledge the many structural barriers marginalized groups encounter. His emphasis on personal accountability, as well as his and the other young Black men's desire to be academically successful, should instead be understood within the context of their racial socialization as a racially and politically motivated act of self-determination, agency, and resilience as resistance in the face of structural barriers. In other words, their racial identity and parental support systems were motivators towards achievement (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Burke 1989; Graham and Anderson 2008).

## Being Black, Male, and High Achieving: Contesting the Deficit

There is some research positively linking the type of proactive racial socialization these students experienced with academic achievement and other forms of well-being (Caughy et al. 2002; Ford and Harris 1997; Hughes and Chen 1999; Murray and Mandara 2003). This link may be true for these young men as evidenced by their grade point averages, participation in upper ability courses, educational expectations, and approaches to school. Currently, all four of the students are enrolled in four-year institutions of higher education. By traditional academic measures, these young men would be considered academically successful. However, sometimes being academically successful comes at a cost, namely social exclusion by peers or being accused of acting White. As discussed earlier, much has been written about Ogbu's oppositional cultural framework as well as Fordham and Ogbu's theory of "acting white" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fryer 2006), including refutations demonstrating high academic expectations and self-efficacy among Black students (Cheng and Starks 2002; Darnell-Ainsworth and Downey 1998; Horvat and O'Connor 2006; Ogbu 1998). Other research explains that the oppositional culture or "acting white" theory holds true to varying degrees but that Black student responses to this accusation are highly variable and dependent on many other factors including school demographics, peer cultural dynamics, structural support, and self-efficacy (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Stinson 2011; Tyson et al. 2005). The present study seems more consistent with the latter explanation; that the Black male students were aware of how their academic prowess was seen by their peers but seemed indifferent to or simply refuted the idea that their academic success came with a social cost.

In general, they felt their academic success was well accepted by most of their peers. As Rodney explained, in some instances friends would tease them for "doin' too much" or overachieving but similar to other studies (Mickelson and Velasco 2006) the antagonists were often identified as "low achieving" and the teasing was deemed harmless and non-threatening to their identity and peer inclusion. Jamal provides his view:

> …like everyone wants to look at culture like say 'oh it's not cool to be smart.' I don't think that's as big an issue as people portray it to be. Like to a certain extent, you might get messed with a little bit, but it's not like because you're smart, people are shunning you. Because you can be smart, but still, you know, be one with everybody else. And like you can be smart and be doing a lot of extracurricular activities and be putting a lot in the school and still be popular and have friends

Jamal downplays anti-intellectualism as a peer cultural norm while providing evidence that one's academic identity does not have to be at odds with peer inclusion. As I have written elsewhere, these students consciously balanced "cool" and school, meeting their and their parents' academic expectations while also maintaining peer group solidarity (Allen 2013a). There was also a sense of confidence in their academic prowess despite the rare teasing they incurred. Talking about his friends, Sean confidently explained, "they're the ones failing. So at the end of the day they know that I'm setting the bar high for them and that they need to pick up their pace in their work to get where I'm at." In contrast to studies explaining that Black males are pressured to conform to negative performances of "Blackness" by resisting the behaviors needed to be academically successful (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Hemmings 1996; Ogbu 2003), these students embraced their academic identities and challenged their peers to experience the same level of success, signifying variation in how Black students respond to threats to their academic and cultural identity.

Though each student was asked about how their academic success was perceived by peers, only Jamal had the actual "acting white" theory fully explained to him, but his insightful critique is worth noting here. Consistent with his earlier quote, he doesn't believe academic success is looked upon negatively but continues on in his argument explaining:

> …I don't think it's that everyone is going to be like 'you're acting white'…I mean like, at white schools, if there are kids getting bad grades, is there a stereotype of them acting Black? Like I don't really think that exists.

Jamal's critique is consistent with a CRT analysis in that it exposes whiteness as property (Harris 1993) in terms of rights of disposition and status (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). In other words, performances of 'whiteness' are privileged within school, and are given higher status relative to other racial performances. In Jamal's critique, he questions why academic success should only be perceived as a property right of Whites while academic failure is the default status given to Blacks. In exposing this hegemonic status hierarchy he creates an ideological rupture that questions the legitimacy of whiteness while simultaneously creating a space where

we can think differently about Black academic identity. Taken together with their racial socialization, these young men demonstrate how Black academic identity is not always constructed in opposition to White hegemony in ways that deny using education as an emancipatory act. On the contrary, their academic identity seems to be an act of resistance to White hegemony that embraces education and the opportunity it provides as an emancipatory act of racial uplift (DuBois 1969; Freire 1970).

## Teacher Support: What Good Teachers Do

In addition to their personal desire, parent involvement and resilience as resistance in the face of structural and cultural barriers, interview data revealed the impact teachers had on Black male achievement. The relationship between teachers and Black male students is well documented, drawing attention to cultural incongruences between students and teachers, low expectations held of Black male students, and teachers' role in the overrepresentation of Black males in special education and school suspensions (Artiles 2003; Delpit 1995; Harry and Klingner 2006; Milner IV 2005, 2008). These issues were also of concern for the students in the present study, sharing their experiences with school based racism including lowered academic expectations and differential treatment by teachers (Allen 2013b). Conversely, they also identified teachers they perceived as contributing to their academic success, teachers that moved beyond deficit views of Black males, providing opportunities for academic success and personal growth. Understanding how their schooling would prepare them for college and work, they praised teachers who challenged them, made the relevance of the class obvious, and showed genuine interest and care for teaching.

Research on Black education has shown the role teachers' perceptions play in the success and failure of students. Holding low expectations, doubting intellectual potential, and dumbing down the curriculum can have powerful affects on students' self efficacy and opportunity to learn (Howard 2010; Milner IV 2010; Steele 2010; Steele and Aronson 1995), and account for many of the subtle acts of racism, or racial microaggressions, that Black students experience in school (Smith et al. 2007; Sue 2010; Yosso et al. 2009). In contrast, the students identified teachers who held high expectations and challenged them with rigorous instructional strategies. Sean describes his appreciation for the rigor of his teacher's instructional approach:

> …he was just trying to get us to a certain level and pushed us. It was really challenging. Every day he would give us lectures like a college teacher would and he would just have us do all kinds of essays that would really challenge you and get you thinking. Um, annotating texts, knowing what you read about, applying it to your life, putting two pieces of literature together, stuff like that.

Having access to highly qualified teachers is important for any student's success but these young men found particular satisfaction in teachers who challenged them with academic skills they perceived would prepare them for college.

In addition, the students believed it was important that teachers made clear the relevancy of the material being taught. Jamal explains the value of his biology teacher's ability to increase his academic efficacy by making course material relevant:

> Make that connection. So, you know, I'll learn it anyway because I need to get a good grade in the class and everything, but I don't put as much into it because it's like, what, you know, it's like investing time in it for no particular reason. But like my biology teacher, it's like biology. And she still is able to make connections to the real world and give examples. So I was able to process it more because, you know, it's easier to learn it than to memorize it. So like if you're making those connections, you're really learning it.

Even though these students had a strong understanding of why they were in school and the efficacy to "learn it anyway," it was still important that teachers made clear connections to the real world in order for the students to feel as though they are "really learning it." Students identified other problem-based approaches their teachers employed including teaching math by having students redesign their backyard given a certain budget or teaching reading comprehension by reinterpreting and acting out scenes to popular Shakespeare stories. Too often teachers teach content knowledge that is void of context, a problem exacerbated by the growing use of scripted curriculum or the oversimplification of curriculum resulting from high stakes assessments. The teachers the students praised did just the opposite, engaging in teaching practices that could be considered culturally relevant (Delpit 2006; Gay 2002; Ladson-Billings 1995a; McDougal 2009), challenging students with rigorous curricula that provided necessary academic competencies while grounding the curriculum in real-world experiences. This approach increased the engagement of the young men by making the content knowledge applicable to their everyday lives.

Another important quality of a teacher was that of caring. The students expected teachers to show they not only cared about teaching but that they cared about their students and student success. Mark explains the caring nature of his geometry teacher:

> He cared about his students really understanding it [geometry]. He didn't care about just the grades and all that stuff. He really wanted us to understand the material and to just be ready for all the tests that we had to take and understand geometry.

One of the more meaningful teacher qualities emerging from the data, genuine interest and care for helping students, included being available to help before, during or after school. It also included keeping students accountable, challenging them even when they didn't want to be challenged and keeping the focus on student learning with less concern about simply meeting mandated standards. Caring for students also meant helping them feel comfortable within the classroom environment. The students regularly referenced a particular (White) teacher who created a comfortable classroom space, which seemed to leave a lasting impression on students like Rodney:

…freshman year you come in and you're scared and you're just nervous about school and stuff and I had her first period and it was the first class I ever came into at the school and she just left an impression on me because she just had this welcoming attitude… and just that whole term she made me feel more comfortable and even still now when I see her, it's just like a 'how do you feel?' Thank you, I only had you for 8, 9 weeks but thank you for what you did. She just really left an impression.

For many Black male students the classroom can be a volatile space where the teacher–student relationship can be antagonistic. It was of great value to these students to have teachers who created comfortable, welcoming and caring spaces, and showed a continued interest in the well-being of the student. However, what is unclear is the reasoning behind the teachers' care practices. It may be that the teachers saw their care practices as politically neutral but nurturing practices focused on attentiveness, empathy and responsiveness to student needs (Gilligan 1993; Noddings 1984, 1992). On the other hand, the care practices of the teachers may stem from a desire for social justice, where helping Black males succeed in school is a political act of resistance to racism (Collins 1990; Ramsey 2012; Siddle Walker and Snarey 2004), much in the way the socializing practices of the fathers were rooted in racial justice. Thus, though the students recognized caring teachers, the motivation of the teachers' care practices remains somewhat unknown.

Finally, I was intentional in naming the racial identity of the previous teacher to demonstrate that cultural congruence between teacher and student does not always mean that the teacher and student must share the same racial background. However, this particular White teacher, along with the other teachers the students spoke highly about, demonstrated care and understanding for their culturally diverse students, enacting their own agency to provide a system of support for these Black male achievers.

## Implications and Conclusion

The student reflections on achievement provide meaningful insight into ways Black males understand the purpose of schooling, enact agency in their own academic pursuits and draw upon parent and teacher systems of support to experience academic success. Despite the pervasive and prevailing deficit notions of Black male academic identity, these students succeeded in spite of such dominant discourse. Their systems of support were important factors in their success, providing varying degrees of motivation, preparation and opportunity needed for one to be resilient through educational systems that have historically created barriers for people of color (Villenas and Deyhle 1999; Yosso 2006).

Their counter-stories and academic measures also demonstrate that Black male success is not an anomaly despite evidence that would suggest it is. Still, there is a continued need to seek out and study those young men who have been academically successful in all levels of education, K-20 and beyond. For one, studies of Black male achievers and the dissemination of such research, hold the potential to shift

dominant discourse on Black male academic identity. If we understand that popular discourse on Black male identity may influence the perceptions educators adopt of their Black students, then it is critically important to find ways to disrupt majoritarian discourse that perpetuates deficit thinking (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

Secondly, identifying what motivations, expectations, and systems of support work to advance Black male achievement can serve as models in other settings. Balancing the focus on what works as well what hasn't regarding Black male education creates the opportunity to identify and apply solutions yet to be discovered.

Some of these solutions may have implications for teachers and teacher preparation. The research literature consistently highlights the benefits of culturally responsive teaching and classroom management strategies (Delpit 2006; Howard 2001; Ladson-Billings 1995b). The students in this study spoke of teachers demonstrating this type of responsiveness in some way or another, but the reality is that not all teachers enter the profession with this type of preparation or commitment (Milner IV 2005; Watson 2011). Examining the support Black male achievers receive from their teachers and identifying effective, culturally responsive practices could serve as valuable models for both in-service and pre-service teachers alike.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider that in this particular study, the acts of agency by the Black males and their support systems were not necessarily coordinated in any particular way. The students rarely spoke of their racialized achievement convictions outside of the home, the parents didn't convey their racial socialization practices to the teachers, and the teachers didn't always have a working relationship with parents. Yet all three groups enacted agency in ways that collectively provided opportunity for success. Future research may consider employing ecological models to examine the interactive nature of these micro-systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). It's possible we can find more nuanced explanations for Black male success with the intent of developing interventions or appropriate training for those involved with Black male students (e.g. parent groups, teachers, administrators).

The young men in this study are highlighted due to their academic achievements in secondary education, though the future outcomes of these efforts on their mobility patterns and quality of life remain to be seen. However, the narratives of these achievers provide much needed insight into possible factors influencing the educational outcomes for academically successful Black men.

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