Title
Review: Educating African American Males: Voices from the Field edited by Olatokunbo S. Fashola

Author
Johnson, Jr., Stanley L.

Peer reviewed

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Much has been written about African American male student achievement and its relationship to the achievement gap phenomenon (Perry, Stelle, & Hilliard, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Hrabrowksi, 1998; Ogbu, 1998; Patterson, 2006; Polite & Davis, 1999; Duncan, 1999; Freeman, 1999). Researchers and media outlets are quick to elaborate on reasons why African Americans are consistently falling behind their white counterparts. Many offer narrow assertions about African American male student achievement from either an historical, sociological, or economical lens when determining school success or failure. Conversely, empirical and mixed-methodological approaches have not been given adequate attention in helping to further the conversation about providing effective solutions toward closing the achievement gap of African American male students and countering deficit-model approaches.

In *Educating African American Males: Voices from the Field*, Olatokunbo S. Fashola and several other prominent educational researchers boldly address this issue. The text is divided into eight chapters, situating itself within several thematic spaces including social, cultural, and historical issues; school reform; early, middle, and high school experiences; structural critiques of masculinity; institutional forms of racism; and extra-curricular activities that help to promote positive self-esteem and critical thinking for African American males. Collectively, the contributors articulate the need for new approaches by challenging the educational community to move beyond traditional measures of achievement and to understand the significance of social, historical, cultural, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and pedagogical approaches which contribute to widening the achievement gap between African American males and their counterparts.

Social and Historical Context of Schooling Experiences for African American Male Student Achievement

Robert Cooper and Will Jordan's "Cultural Issues in Comprehensive School Reform," the book's opening chapter, addresses African American male student achievement by tracing and examining both the historical and systematic effects of racism and by showing how institutionalized oppression plays a large role in widening the achievement gap. The authors strategically and impressively analyze factors such as rampant unemployment, poverty, and inadequate access to health care as potential factors for African American males being disenfranchised within the context of school and society. The authors suggest that there is an

"intergenerational poverty" (p. 2) that perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy for many African American males. Ogbu's (1998) research helps to contextualize these historical inequities. He suggests that "the treatment of minorities in the wider society is reflected in their treatment in education" (p. 159).

In "The Trouble with Black Boys," Pedro C. Noguera helps to contextualize some of the pragmatic approaches needed to understand some of the behavioral patterns of African American males that affect them in school. He provides relevant and timely data and research that document how they have been marginalized and victimized by schooling experiences within capitalist educational structures. This chapter presents an excellent qualitative study that seeks to determine how teachers play a role in motivating students; teachers can use these data to reevaluate and adjust their pedagogical and instructional practices and to meet the needs of African American males while still providing appropriate scaffolding to help students meet academic standards. Noguera also argues quite poignantly that students have to be trained and conditioned to see that schools are beneficial to them and that expectations for them are high.

Three of the book's chapters collectively examine the schooling experiences of African American males by analyzing their achievement patterns in public schools and addressing their subsequent disengagement. They argue that Black males underachieve on standardized tests and experience greater "stop-put" and "drop-out" rates. Black males perform well in the early grades, but a rapid decline in academic performance is evident by age nine or the fourth grade (Garibaldi, 1992). The authors suggest that teachers must place literacy and language development at the forefront of their instructional priorities. This is especially crucial during their early school years (K-4th grade); providing skills to help African American males become independent, critical thinkers is paramount for their overall academic success or failure.

Social Construction of Masculinity: Challenging Homophobia and Misogyny in Schools

James Earl Davis' chapter, "Early Schooling and Academic Achievement of African-American Males" is especially important in showing how homophobia and misogyny often go unchallenged within the context of schooling. Davis argues that African American male students feel threatened and disengage from school-related activities because they have to contend with the possibility of being classified as "feminine," which poses a potential threat to their sense of Black masculinity. Davis states:

> Understanding the role of peers, in addition to teacher and families, the social construction of masculinity for Black boys in early education would constitute a

major research effort in addressing issues of disengagement and achievement. Studying Black boys' constructions of masculinity and framing how they link these constructions to achievement motivation and performance will be extremely important in unpacking the achievement gap problem. (p. 143)

Even though these are taboo subjects, sexuality and hyper-masculine bravado are learned traits that are not fully discussed and problematized, which, in turn, causes African American boys (and children in general) to develop an inclusive pedagogical language that challenges such forms of dominance within the context of the classroom. Having conversations about this with teachers, staff, and parents is vital. Not addressing these topics further develops a false sense of masculinity for African American males and continues to silence lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students. All students' experiences must be valued and respected, and the fact that students have to endure repeated attacks of discrimination significantly increases disengagement. Therefore, holistic education must move to include not only the aforementioned tenets described and discussed within the context of this section, but also pedagogy that fosters fairness, respect, and equity for all students. More importantly, this plays an enormous role as African American males become older and are faced with more difficult educational environments, which, in turns, results in an overall decline in their engagement and motivation with school.

Extra-Curricular Activities and Role Models in Increasing African American Male Student Achievement

The book also provides a much-needed discussion on the importance of extracurricular activities and community-based programs for African American male student achievement. Braddock's "Athletics, Academics, and African American Males" is a comprehensive study of how these three areas can be used to help African American males develop positive self-esteem, achieve at high levels, and more importantly, learn the values of working and understanding group dynamics that will help them to matriculate successfully into society. Braddock suggests that African American males who participate in sports are more likely to see themselves as contributing members of both their teams and their communities. Through sports and extracurricular activities, then, African American males begin to conceptualize a new language in which engagement, high expectation, and moral decisions play a significant role in their quest toward becoming self-reliant human beings.

Typical schooling experiences for African American males include tracking into the lowest classes (Oakes, Lipton, & Jones, 1995), victimization by negative stereotypes (Stelle, 1997), and assimilation into an educational system that devalues their cultural strengths (Kunjufu, 1997). The highly practical and

rigorously informative research presented in *Educating African-American Males* serves its purpose: to advocate for holding high standards for African American males by using holistic approaches that recognize achievement via alternative means to the traditional, quantitatively derived measurements. Its multidisciplinary approach helps further the conversation by providing effective pipelines to close the achievement gap for African American males.

Fashola and her colleagues offer solutions to this complex problem by creating much-needed conversational spaces that can transform African American males into dependable, responsible, accountable, and successful young men who will become active participants in their communities even under the most difficult of circumstances. The contributors have spent a considerable amount of intellectual energy in critically investigating, evaluating, and documenting the educational experiences and plight of African American male student achievement; they explicitly provide the educational community with clear, cogent, and accessible research tools that will aid in changing the current fate of African American males by closing the educational gaps for this population within the context of public schools. We owe it to ourselves as a field to investigate and to begin applying the practical and effective prescriptions outlined in this very engaging and necessary text. Failure to do this will only further widen the educational gaps for African American males and continue to set them up as cheap labor, economic dependents, and candidates for the penal system.

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Reviewer

Stanley L. Johnson, Jr. is currently a PhD student in the Urban Schooling Division of UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. His research focuses on critically investigating high achieving settings for African American male students. He is particularly interested in teachers' instructional and pedagogical practices that are instrumental in creating both academic and social environments for African American males to set and maintain the motivation needed to perform at high academic levels. Johnson served as a district office administrator in curriculum and instruction and taught high school English in the Compton Unified School District prior to entering the doctoral program.