THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES: THE EARLY YEARS

Antoine M. Garibaldi
Xavier University of Louisiana

INTRODUCTION

While our nation's cities and communities are experiencing numerous problems such as high unemployment, low educational achievement, increasing levels of crime and rampant drug cultures, one segment of the population in this country is being disproportionately affected by these negative circumstances. That group of individuals is young black men. Their current condition has been poignantly portrayed in the media and their future is being characterized by pejorative modifiers such as "disappearing," "endangered," and "vanishing." But no matter how appalling and gloomy the situation is and may seem, there are viable solutions which can bring about the gradual resolution of this overwhelming problem. The remedies though must span the entire developmental, educational and social continuum of the lives of these young men and will require the assistance of parents, teachers, college students and other significant individuals and groups in the communities where we live.

THE NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Most persons will agree that there is a direct correlation between the educational achievement and attainment of young black men and their future vocational success and earning potential. And it is for that reason that I contend that *education is the primary solution to improving the self concept, self esteem, academic ability and future economic opportunities of these young men.* There is no one magic solution to the many adverse conditions which these young men are experiencing because the symptoms of the problem are too widespread. The following national data, for example, very clearly demonstrate that we have indeed reached a crisis of epidemic proportions.

-- The median age of black men, according to the most available (1986) census statistics, is the lowest among all segments of the population at 25.5 years -- almost three years younger than black females (28.2), six years younger than white males (31.2), eight years younger than white females (33.9) and six years younger than the national median of 31.8 years of age.

-- In 1984, 20 percent of black men between the ages of 20 and 24 reported no income, compared to 8 percent in 1973; and in 1986, almost one-fourth (24.1 percent) of all 20 to 24 year old black males were unemployed compared to 10.7 nationally for this age group.

-- Black males represented 43 percent of the federal and state prisoner population in the United States in 1985 (216,344 of 494,678) even though they represented only 6 percent of the population. And as The Sentencing Project in Washington, DC reported in February 1990, 609,000 black males between the ages of 20 and 29 are today either in jail, on probation or on parole -- 23 percent of the entire 20 to 29 year old black male population!

-- Black males are also more often the victims of homicides in this country, 50 percent higher than for white males, and they represented 33 percent, or 6616, of all homicides in this country in 1985 -- the fifth leading cause of death for black males. (In 1989 in New Orleans, more than 70 percent of the 250 homicides were drug-related and a comparable percentage of the victims were black males -- a pattern that is very similar in most urban areas.) Sixty three percent of Washington, DC's homicide victims in 1988 were black males between the ages of 15 and 34 (235 of 372); more than half of Detroit's (352/686) and Baltimore's (116/226) homicide

victims were black males; and the pattern was similar in New York (534/1672 in 1987) and Los Angeles (233/811) where almost one-third of homicide victims were black males.

For many individuals, very little of the preceding data is surprising. But the morbid statistics do tell us directly and by inference that unless something is done now, the future survival of the black male and consequently the stability and viability of the black family will be threatened even more in the near future. Young black men without a job or without sufficient income can hardly support themselves, let alone a family. And those who have not obtained a high school diploma will find that their chances of obtaining a job without an education are diminished considerably. (Forty three percent of the 20- to 24-year old black men who reported no income in 1984, for example, were high school dropouts.) Therefore, improving the educational achievement and attainment of these young men must be at the core of any remedies we propose.

BLACK MALES' STATUS IN THE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Educational indicators all across this country show that the majority of young black men are not faring well in most of the nation's 16,000 urban, rural and suburban school districts. Their educational deficiencies are well documented nationally but the problems are so pronounced in some communities that sometimes it is difficult to be optimistic that many of the adverse trends can be reversed. This author, for example, was asked by the New Orleans school district in 1987 to direct a volunteer study on the educational status of black males in the local system. The study arose out of concern as well as some anecdotal evidence by school board members that black males were rarely represented on school honor rolls and in academic extracurricular activities.

After assembling data from the previous academic year, it quickly became clear to the author and his volunteer committee of civic leaders and educators that black males were disproportionately represented in almost all categories of academic failure. *While black males represented 43 percent of New Orleans' public school population in 1986-87, they accounted for 58 percent of the non-promotions, 65 percent of the suspensions, 80 percent of the expulsions and 45 percent of the dropouts.* (It is important to mention also that the situation for black females was also bleak as they represented 34 percent of the non-promotions, 29 percent of the suspensions, 20 percent of the expulsions and 41 percent of the dropouts in the 1986-87 school year.)

When the data were more closely analyzed, it became obvious that black boys began to experience educational problems in their early school years. Almost sixty percent of the first-graders who were not promoted in 1986-87 (817 out of a total of 1470) were young black males. The proportion of black males who were not promoted during the middle school years of sixth, seventh and eighth grades was unfortunately just as bad, as they also represented close to sixty percent of non-promotions in those grades (1664 out of a total of 2774 students).

In the case of suspensions, another negative and dysfunctional indicator which contributes to and is a result of academic failure, these young men accounted for 62 percent of all suspensions between grades six through ten (5445 out of a total of 8810 for the five grade levels) and dropout rates increased rapidly beginning at grade nine. The latter data and grade levels are emphasized because both the early and middle grades are places where the academic and behavioral problems of black males begin to occur, where they are most pronounced and where remedies are urgently needed.

With respect to academic achievement, we also observed that these youth were performing significantly below the national mean on standardized tests. For example, approximately one-third of black male and female students scored in the lowest quartile on the reading and mathematics sections of the California Test of Basic Skills. But even though only 13 and 18 percent of black males scored in the highest quartile on the reading and mathematics sections, respectively, and only 16 and 20 percent of black females scored in the highest quartile on reading and mathematics, respectively, it is important to highlight the

fact that approximately one-third of the black males in the sample scored at or above the mean on both of these sections of the test (32.4 percent of them on the reading component and 37.9 percent on the mathematics section). The latter positive data thus should not only make us more optimistic but also should encourage us to implement more successful intervention strategies that can increase the academic performance and expectations of a larger group of these youth.

New Orleans is not an isolated example when one reviews the dismal performance and low retention rates of black male students. Most of these students, as we verified, began to show signs of academic failure as early as the third and fourth grades and these regressions in educational performance inevitably led to many young men dropping out or being suspended for behavioral problems as early as the seventh grade. Thus, the pool of those who eventually entered senior high school was very small and the proportion of those who actually graduated from high school was reduced considerably.

The devastating effects of high dropout rates and low academic performance in most of our metropolitan school districts and urban areas have also had a noticeable impact on the numbers of black males who have gone to college over the last ten years. Analyses of data between 1976 and 1986 show that black male enrollment has declined by seven percent over that ten year period and there have been an annual average of 194,000 more black females than males attending college since 1976 (see chart). Black males accounted for 4.3 percent of college enrollment in 1976 but only 3.5 percent in 1986, even though high school graduation rates for blacks increased by almost 10 percent. Moreover, the figure of more than one million black students in college is skewed further by the fact that 43 percent of black males and females are in two-year and community colleges where the rate of transfer to a college or university is barely 10 percent.

To amplify the previous discussion, the following chart demonstrates how the gap between the college enrollment of black males and black females has been widening since 1976. The data come from the biennial surveys of post-secondary education which are compiled by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

DISPARITY OF BLACK FEMALES AND MALES IN COLLEGE (IN THOUSANDS)

	FEMALES	MALES	DIFFERENCE
1976	563	470	(-96)
1978	601	453	(-148)
1980	643	464	(-179)
1982	644	458	(-186)
1984	639	437	(-202)
1986	646	436	(-210)
1988	687	443	(-244)

Overall, black women represent 60 percent of all black students in college; they account for 60 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded to black students (approximately 34,000 of the 56,554 undergraduate degrees received by blacks in 1987); and black women received 63 percent of the 13,867 master's degrees and 58 percent of the 912 doctorates awarded to black students in 1987. Moreover, while the number of blacks receiving bachelor's degrees between 1976 and 1987 declined by 4.3 percent overall, *12.2 percent fewer black males earned undergraduate degrees during that twelve year period* (Wilson and Carter, 1989).

IDENTIFYING REMEDIES AND PRESCRIPTIONS

The previous data clearly show that much needs to be done in order to increase black males' participation, matriculation and their academic performance throughout the entire education continuum. A variety of solutions has been offered as this national discussion has proceeded (e.g., more male teachers in schools as well as male role models, separate educational facilities for males, the increased role of parents, etc.) but no single solution can effectively eradicate this widespread problem. Our analyses of the academic achievement and school progression of a large segment of New Orleans' black male students (Garibaldi, 1988) emphasized to us that *the education problems of these young men begin early, are multifaceted and require the collective action of parents, teachers, and the entire community to ameliorate this situation.*

Even though the challenge appears to be overwhelming, realistic and viable solutions are available to increase the numbers of black males who are indeed succeeding in schools, attending and graduating from college and obtaining meaningful jobs, despite the fact that they are not in the significant numbers that we would expect given their representation in the 18 to 24 year old age cohort. But the remedies must be systematic rather than narrowly focused and include black male students, teachers, parents and the community at large. For that reason, I continue to offer a few fundamental solutions which I have advanced before. They are by no means extensive but they do address some of the primary issues related to the early developmental, social, and educational needs of black males.

These personal recommendations include the following: (1) we must raise the academic expectations and achievement of black male students; (2) we must bridge the gap between the perceptions of teachers and the public about black male students' abilities and aspirations; and (3) we must involve parents and the community-at-large in the motivation of these youth.

Raising the Academic Expectations and Achievement of Black Male Students

In order for more black male students to achieve in school, they must first and foremost be challenged and taught to believe that they can succeed, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. These expectations and aspirations must be nurtured and reinforced early in their lives by parents, by teachers and counselors, by the black community and by the larger society as well. Even more, black male students' success in school must be acknowledged, promoted and rewarded in schools, in their homes and in their local communities. Simultaneously though we must bring to a halt the negative peer pressure and bantering encountered by black males who are doing well in school. Even though the teasing may seem playful, the psychological consequences of intimidation, ostracism and ridicule are much more serious because they discourage successful black boys from working harder for the mere purpose of being accepted by the peer group.

These many forms of intimidation are affecting young black men of *all* socioeconomic backgrounds and there is ample evidence to indicate that low college going rates result from this peer pressure and black males' lower academic expectations. In 1988 only 23 and 28.1 percent of low and middle income black males between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in college compared to highs of 37.2 and 53.2 percent for those two income groups, respectively, in 1976 (Wilson and Carter, 1989). We must not tolerate this behavior in our communities if we want more of our young men to use rather than waste the academic talents they possess.

Despite the fact that the media portray few successful black males in roles other than athletics or entertainment, many young black men in other fields are succeeding and pursuing post-secondary opportunities. However, there are some individuals who have been swayed so much by the negative press and stereotypes that they have given up on these young persons' abilities and have decided that they have very few vocational interests. For that reason, it is the responsibility of the masses who believe that there is hope to begin to instill the value of education and to reinforce its importance in long-term financial stability.

To be more specific, we must teach these young men about the more permanent rewards of delayed rather than immediate gratification and help them to internalize personal values that will help to bolster their self-concepts. But this can only occur if we encourage them to participate in more extracurricular activities which are related to academics (e.g., academic clubs, the debate team, yearbook, etc.) and motivate them to take leadership roles in the school (e.g., on the student council or as patrol boys). Teachers and administrators can also promote and reward these young men's academic achievement in schools by providing tangible forms of recognition (e.g., academic "letters, T-shirts, etc.) and other forms of external reinforcement to demonstrate to them that their efforts are important and worthy of the same kind of public recognition society has been giving to athletic prowess. We must take the initiative and put our priorities in the right places, making sure that educational achievement ranks higher than any other accomplishment.

Despite the magnitude and severity of this educational crisis, I must continue to emphasize that many young black men are overcoming unbelievable obstacles and ignoring peer pressure to do well in school. Contrary to conventional wisdom, many young men do want to finish school and many want to be challenged. *In our survey of more than 2250 black male students in the New Orleans study, for example, 95 percent of them said they expected to graduate from high school but close to 40 percent of them said they believed that their teachers did not set high enough goals for them. Moreover, 60 percent of them said they believed that their teachers should push them harder.* Those findings suggest that black male students do want to be challenged to do well in school but it can only be accomplished if those who are responsible for their academic and social development give them the necessary motivation and guidance to make this a reality.

Before concluding this section, it is important to mention that there is a genuine opportunity here for all of us who are concerned about this situation to learn from (and continue to reinforce) the academic success of young black males who are performing well in school and who want to achieve their aspirations. Black males as a group are not monolithic and it is imperative that we attempt to destroy those stereotypical images that have prompted some individuals to develop negative self-fulfilling prophecies about their potential. *It may be useful, therefore, to focus more of our energies on how black males are*

succeeding rather than on why they are failing. But regardless of the approach, more emphasis must be devoted to showing all students why and how educational achievement and attainment are critical to their long-term security as adults and as parents.

Bridging the Gap Between the Perceptions of Teachers and the Public and Black Male Students' Abilities and Aspirations

Another major problem that exists and which must be confronted in our schools, and in society in general, is the tremendous perception gap that exists with respect to what the public believes black males can and want to learn and what these young men in fact know that they are capable of achieving. Negative self-fulfilling prophecies about black male students' intellectual abilities pervade our schools and society as strongly today as they did for most non-white and poor youth prior to the days of equal educational opportunity in the mid 1960s. It is very disappointing though that some teachers in our urban schools have developed preconceived notions about black male children's intellectual capabilities and potential instead of believing that they all can learn and succeed.

One of the most disturbing findings from our study in New Orleans, for example, which confirmed the above perception came from teachers' responses to an item on a questionnaire we designed for them. *When we asked teachers if they believed that their black male students would go to college, almost six out of every ten indicated that they did not believe that this would occur*. What made this response more troubling was the fact that *60 percent of our random sample of 318 teachers taught in elementary schools, 70 percent of them had 10 or more years of experience, and 65 percent of them were black*! Obviously, teachers' racial, ethnic or cultural affiliations do not make them immune from holding negative self-fulfilling prophecies about the children whom they teach. Moreover, the fact that some teachers have lower expectations for non-white students in general, black male students in particular, and as early as the elementary grades, are strong signs that teacher expectations must be objective and, in many instances, changed. Their perceptions, like others in society, are undoubtedly influenced by what they see happening to the masses of male (and female), poor and non-white youth. These negative perceptions about children's abilities, many of which are subtle and unconscious, must be discussed honestly and

more openly in schools so that all children will have a fair chance to learn and succeed. Similarly, those teachers who have preconceived notions about black male students' academic abilities and aspirations must have a more open mind about their capabilities. It is even more important that teachers and counselors help them to set high expectations for themselves, give them leadership roles in schools and encourage them to pursue post-secondary and vocational opportunities. *Motivating black male youth in schools is clearly the most pressing remedy but this must be accompanied by immediate, continuous, and appropriate reinforcement and positive feedback to emphasize to them that education is the key to their future.*

The Civic Imperative: Parental and Community Responsibilities

The resolution of the crisis which black males are experiencing cannot be solved by teachers and school staffs alone. There are equally important roles for parents, the black community and also the general public. Parents must motivate their male children to do well in school and also support their aspirations to attend college in the same way that they do for their female children. In the New Orleans study, eight out of ten of the 3523 parents surveyed responded that they believed their sons expected to go to college. But one fourth of that same sample indicated that they had never gone to their child's school for a report card conference! We cannot expect black male students to maintain their interest in learning and to have high expectations without the support and encouragement of parents. Teachers and administrators, nevertheless, may be extremely helpful in getting more parents involved in their children's schools as well as showing them how to monitor their child's academic progress on a daily basis.

The print and electronic media which, as previously noted, typically portray "successful" black males in advertisements and on television primarily as athletes and entertainers, also have a moral responsibility to show other accomplished black male role models in business, education, the sciences, medicine, law and many other professions. Businessmen and businesswomen can also support the aspirations of the male children of their employees by rewarding and/or acknowledging them for their academic success, their daily attendance at school and their participation in extracurricular clubs by giving them part-time or summer jobs for their hard work and effort.

Members of social and civic organizations, persons from blue- and white-collar professions, retired persons, religious leaders and many others can also be instrumental in encouraging black male students to stay in school and help them to appreciate the value of delayed gratification and also the importance of academic success to their future financial security. College students, especially black males, have an important role to play in this effort by regularly visiting schools and establishing mentoring, tutoring and peer support programs. Both their presence and interaction with these youth can help to destroy the presumed stigmas which they erroneously associate with academic achievement. They can motivate them toward college (by bringing them to campus and encouraging them to take challenging courses in junior and senior high school) as well as toward other vocational interests which they might not have believed were possible for them. This modeling and mentoring are so important to building these young men's self confidence and raising their aspirations.

CONCLUSION

This problem is too widespread for one solution and it is unrealistic to believe that only schools can ameliorate this situation. Through collective efforts, school personnel and concerned individuals can raise the self esteem and self concepts of these young men, as well as their academic achievement, expectations and aspirations. But more concerted guidance, formal and informal, is necessary to reverse the negative trends which too many young black men are experiencing. These special efforts, however, must be directed at the elementary and middle school years.

Leadership development in schools, regardless of students' grade levels, should receive special attention to help these young men develop the initiative they will need to perform well in school, to compete in the workplace, to achieve their vocational aspirations and to become productive citizens. Moreover, programs focused on the development of constructive and socially approved values (e.g., respect, altruism, etiquette, sharing, etc.) should also be considered to counteract the materialistic culture in which these youth live and the images to which they are constantly exposed. By providing them with more opportunities to help and show concern for others, they will see that service is rewarding and satisfying.

Though many other non-white and female children are experiencing many of these same problems, we must provide young black males especially with the incentives they need to obtain an education and to raise their levels of self-confidence. It must become the responsibility of all segments of the community to tell them often that completing high school, obtaining a college education, becoming a teacher, a doctor or an entrepreneur is easily attainable. Collective action is needed now to address this problem, for as I wrote in the text of the final report of the New Orleans study on black males: "The malady is too grave for a single prescription and the symptoms are too widespread for us to postpone treatment any longer."

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