

THE EFFECTS OF OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE ON BLACK MALES

**The Effects of Oppositional Culture on the Academic Success of Low-Income Black Males
in Higher Education**

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Abstract

This capstone thesis urgently addresses the adverse cultural development of low-income Black males and their lack of academic success in higher education. Throughout the nation, the retention and graduation rates for Black males in higher education institutions remain low despite higher education diversity initiatives and internal resources to assist them during their college careers. This research will examine the historical systemic factors that contributed to Black males' academic struggles and how these factors shape their culturally opposing behavior toward the U.S. educational system. In addition, I will explore the national and community-based organizations that strategically implement core value solutions suggested by scholarly experts in this thesis paper.

The Effects of Oppositional Culture on the Academic Success of Low-Income Black Males in Higher Education

My background has deeply influenced my choice of this thesis topic. I grew up in a challenging neighborhood in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. Every day, I saw drug addiction, crime, and poverty. Many of the Black males and close friends in my neighborhood were involved in criminal activities, which led to incarceration or the cemetery. I was fortunate to get the opportunity to enroll in SUNY Brockport through the Arthur O. Eve Educational Opportunity Program. Because of this, I obtained a bachelor's degree and am now pursuing a Master's. My experience has given me a deep-rooted passion for helping other Black males achieve success in attaining their educational goals. This is the reason I chose this thesis for my capstone project. Today, in America, most Black male students are still living in the same type of neighborhood I grew up in and looking for a way out. How we handle these young Black men when they reach college, particularly during their first year of college, will go a long way in determining if they survive in the institutions that admit them and thrive while they are there.

Contributing Factors to the Lack of Academic Achievement of Low-Income Black Males

Before completing high school, many Black students face obstacles in accessing college. A mere 57% of Black students enroll in the comprehensive array of math and science courses necessary for college preparedness, compared to 81% of Asian American students and 71% of white students (Bridges, 2018). This lack of readiness is reflected in standardized test scores, with 61% of Black students from the 2015 high school graduating class failing to meet any of the

four ACT college readiness benchmarks—nearly twice the rate of 31% for all students (Bridges, 2018). These statistics underscore the pressing need for immediate action. Subpar test scores heighten the challenges associated with the college application process, including acceptance to institutions, securing scholarships, and achieving success in subsequent studies.

The impediments to college graduation for Black students are underscored by the comparatively low retention rates observed nationwide. Within four-year public institutions, only 45.9% of Black students complete their degrees within six years—the lowest rate among various racial and ethnic groups. Black males exhibit the lowest completion rate at 40% (Bridges, 2018). This elevated dropout rate is partly attributed to 65% of Black college students self-supporting, necessitating a delicate balance between pursuing a degree and fulfilling full-time work and familial obligations (Bridges, 2018).

Of the students who enrolled in college in the Fall 2010 semester, 62 percent of white students graduated with a degree by the summer of 2016, compared to only 39 percent of Black students (Barshay, 2023). This disparity indicates that a disproportionate number of Black students are leaving college without completing their degrees, often burdened with debt. Although there was a notable improvement in completion rates for students who began college in 2015, substantial disparities persist. By the summer of 2021, nearly 70 percent of white students had graduated, while only 45 percent of Black students had reached this educational achievement (Barshay, 2023).

Brown (2000) argued that Afrocentric academies can offer a valuable educational response to Black communities' challenges in urban areas. Brown argues that these communities often lack the necessary support for healthy identity development, which can lead Black youth to

adopt “oppositional gangsta culture” norms as markers of authentic Black identity. Brown (2000) suggested that Afrocentrism can properly acknowledge Black youth and their needs and proposed an Afrocentric curriculum that emphasizes the historical struggles of black culture. Brown (2000) suggested a compromise to address political participation and individual autonomy concerns. Primary education should prioritize liberal educational goals, while an Afrocentric curriculum should guide secondary education. By offering this option, Brown (2000) hoped to reframe our perception of Afrocentric academies and provide a solution that benefits black youth in urban areas.

Oppositional Culture

Low-income Black males face systemic barriers to educational opportunity, perpetuating a cycle of inequality. However, these young men are not defined by their circumstances. They possess immense potential and talent but are often underrepresented in educational settings and marginalized due to various factors. This project aims to identify and address these barriers and propose solutions that will help to ensure equitable access to education for all, thereby unleashing the full potential of these young men. Educators, policymakers, and community leaders play a crucial role in this process, and their involvement is essential to bring about the necessary changes.

Researchers have explored Black males' "burden of acting white" concerning academic achievement (Ogbu, 2004, p. 4). Ogbu (2004) expanded on his research and criticism from the academic community, which he felt altered the original thesis and formed their conclusion. The author stated that the scholarly community ignored the historical significance of Black Americans' cultural rejection of White society and focused on Black students' behavior with

their educational success (Ogbu, 2004). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) investigated the ecological, social, and psychological factors that may result in pressure or stigma within the Black community for displaying behaviors or striving for academic accomplishments, believing that these are associated with white culture. This dynamic can lead to internal struggles and external obstacles for Black students aiming for academic excellence. Additionally, they have explored the coping strategies employed by Black students to overcome these obstacles and thrive in educational environments (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Many Blacks value education but still face academic struggles. Black males often have trust issues and negative attitudes toward education, significantly impacting their academic success (Irving & Hundley, 2008). When Black males do not trust their schools, they are less likely to have positive expectations about their academic performance (Irving & Hundley, 2008). When they have negative attitudes towards education, they are less likely to see the value of academic success. They tend to expect less from their academic achievements when they have these issues. This is a significant problem for Black males, as it contributes to their high dropout rates, lower test scores, and limited enrollment in college (Irving & Hundley, 2008). Schools and communities must identify early warning signs of these attitudes and work together to address them. Promoting a positive cultural identity among Black youth can help them see the value of academic achievement. This is a collective responsibility that we must all strive to address.

Oppositional Culture and Black Males' Academic Achievement

Research on Black males has highlighted the correlation between cultural mistrust, oppositional cultural attitudes, and factors like outcome expectations, which influence academic success. Irving and Hudley (2008) concluded that cultural mistrust is a significant predictor of

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academic achievement, with higher mistrust levels correlating with lower expectations for educational outcomes and a greater inclination towards oppositional cultural attitudes. Those with high levels of cultural mistrust, coupled with oppositional cultural attitudes- a term used to describe a rejection or resistance to mainstream cultural norms and a diminished valuation of educational outcomes, tend to have lower expectations of the benefits of their educational endeavors (Irving & Hundley, 2008). Irving and Hundley's (2008) findings have vital implications for educational research and practice, especially in urban settings where early indicators like resistant cultural identity or cultural mistrust may signal risk factors for educational underachievement. Policies and practices in the school system that foster identity development for Black youth can lead to a positive cultural identity aligned with academic success (Irving & Hundley, 2008). Black males who value educational outcomes but exhibit oppositional cultural attitudes may need assistance to achieve them through educational channels.

Lena Addo (1997) formulated a study in which she hypothesized that students' oppositional behavior, characterized by poor conduct, would be inversely related to their attitudes toward school while positively correlated with their self-perceived competence in non-academic areas. The researcher collected data from 46 students enrolled in an urban public school to test this hypothesis. The students completed questionnaires on their school behavior, attitudes towards school, and perceived competence in different domains, while two teachers assessed their school behavior (Addo, 1997). Results showed that the students had favorable views of the school and exhibited high overall self-esteem. Contrary to prior research that implied that oppositional behavior stemmed from doubts about the rewards of academic effort, this study found that students exhibiting high levels of oppositional behavior believed more

strongly in the idea that investing in education would lead to future success (i.e., adhering to the American achievement ideology) compared to their peers with low levels of oppositional behavior (Addo, 1997). Moreover, the study found no correlation between oppositional behavior and self-reported competence in non-academic areas. Self-reported academic proficiency was positively associated with self-perceived competence in non-academic domains and overall self-esteem across the entire sample (Addo, 1997). Thus, these findings suggest that oppositional behavior does not necessarily stem from negative attitudes toward school. Instead, it can coexist with optimism regarding the effectiveness of education as a pathway to future achievement (Addo, 1997).

School to Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline is a topic explaining the adverse outcomes stemming from a historic systemic racist infrastructure in American society. The pipeline describes how educational systems misuse suspensions (in and out of school) and expel students, reducing their academic instruction and increasing their risk of involvement with the criminal justice system (Dutil, 2020). The current structure of education (higher education in particular) has been deeply rooted in systemic racism since colonial America (Sawyer & Waite, 2021). Sawyer and Waite (2021) state that the inheritance of intergenerational privilege, the term "Whiteness," derives from the power and privilege of racism. To expand on Whiteness, the authors state that Whiteness comes in several forms, such as how white people might view themselves from a privileged standpoint in their social environment (Sawyer & Waite, 2021). The school-to-prison pipeline and the "zero tolerance" policies throughout the U.S. educational system disproportionately affect the academic success of Black students (Dutil, 2020, p. 171).

In the 2013-2014 school year, Black students in the public school system in the United States received the highest rate of out-of-school suspensions (13.7 percent of 2.6 million students), which doubled the next highest racial or ethnic group, which was 6.7 percent (de Brey et al., 2019). In addition, Black males received the highest out-of-suspension rate (17.6 percent) compared to the next-highest male group of 9.6 (de Brey et al., 2019). Dutil (2021) describes the school-to-prison pipeline as victimizing BIPOC students from achieving academic success to arranging this group for the criminal justice system. The author mentions in the article how the Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA) is being implemented throughout the U.S. educational system to combat the school-to-pipeline and zero-tolerance policies (Dutil, 2021). The TIA approach is to have school officials receive mental health training on the effects of trauma and how to provide treatment in an empathic or compassionate decision-making practice (Dutil, 2021). However, Dutil (2021) did note that many schools may not have the resources to address their students' needs. The obstacles that low-income Black males have to overcome in the educational system are daunting, and as a nation, we need to support services to address their needs.

Community-Based Collaboration Initiatives

Community-based organizations serving low-income areas provide academic tutoring, college readiness programs, and scholarships. In 2014, former U.S. President Barack Obama created the My Brother's Keeper program (Obama Foundation, n.d.). The initiative collaborates with public and private organizations and community groups to meet Black male students' unique needs by providing specialized academic assistance, tutoring, mentoring, and enrichment activities (Obama Foundation, n.d.).

Secondary Education Initiatives

Culturally relevant curricula, integrating materials and teaching methods that reflect students from under-served communities' experiences and cultural backgrounds, can enhance their engagement and academic performance. Another example is the National Urban League's Project Ready Program, which provides an evidence-based curriculum to prepare students of color (grades 8-12) for college access, career readiness, and life (National Urban League, 2024). To help students transition to higher education, Project Ready offers college preparation programs, workshops on college readiness, SAT/ACT preparation courses, and assistance with college and financial aid application processes. They also provide positive discipline practices, implementing restorative justice methods and culturally positive behavior interventions that help foster a supportive school climate (National Urban League, 2024). The National Urban League also sponsors an annual Youth Summit Conference, allowing students from different U.S. cities to network with influential personalities and colleges and universities throughout the country (National Urban League, 2024).

Higher Education Initiatives

Colleges and universities have also established retention initiatives providing academic support, counseling, and mentoring tailored to Black males, BIPOC, and first-generation college students (Gardenhire et al., 2016). Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) researched eighty-two, two-year, and four-year, colleges' Men of Color (MOC) initiatives in over thirty states to evaluate the best practices for achieving excellence academically, personally, and professionally. Several components used by these MOC initiatives were identified: academic advising and counseling, academic and study skills training, leadership training, mentoring, and

special events or workshops (Gardenhire et al., 2016). The latter component aims to increase student engagement, persistence, and college graduation rates for men of color and to chart the way forward with a vision for future evaluative work (Gardenhire et al., 2016). Colleges have also encouraged and supported creating affinity groups and support networks on campus to improve connections among Black male students with shared experiences and challenges.

Scholarships and financial aid targeted explicitly at Black male students help alleviate financial barriers to higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In addition, cultural centers have been established on college campuses to allow Black male students to engage with their cultural heritage, participate in summer bridge programs, access college resources, and foster community bonds (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Conclusion

The journey from challenging neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant to college campuses is formidable for many Black males. Despite facing systemic barriers and cultural stereotypes, initiatives at various educational tiers aim to dismantle these obstacles and support their academic success. From community-based mentorship programs to culturally relevant secondary and higher education curricula, efforts are underway to foster a positive academic identity and empower these students to thrive. As we strive for equity in education, it is crucial to continue advocating for policies and practices that not only admit Black males into colleges but also ensure they receive the support needed to graduate and excel.

Some argue that the initiatives aimed at supporting Black males may inadvertently perpetuate cultural stereotypes by singling out this specific group for special attention. However, it is essential to understand that these initiatives are not about singling out a group but about inclusivity. While initiatives aimed at supporting Black males are crucial, it is equally essential to

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ensure that these efforts do not inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes. By focusing on holistic support for all individuals, we can work towards breaking down stereotypes and promoting inclusivity within the education system.

Others argue that focusing solely on Black males neglects the needs of other marginalized groups within the education system, perpetuating inequality differently. While it is valid to recognize that focusing solely on Black males may lead to the neglect of other marginalized groups, it is essential to adopt an intersectional approach that addresses the needs of all marginalized groups within the education system. By doing so, we can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for all students.

There is also the viewpoint that advocating for specific policies targeting Black males could potentially create resistance or backlash from those who feel that resources should be distributed more universally across all student populations. Considering potential resistance or backlash is crucial when advocating for specific policies targeting a particular group. It is essential to communicate that supporting Black males does not mean neglecting other student populations. Emphasizing the broader positive impact of such initiatives on the entire student body can help mitigate resistance and build support for more targeted efforts.

Failure is not an option. The reality for these young Black men is that failure to educate them will ensure that their lives will be that much more difficult, resulting in lowered job prospects and income and being lured into lives of crime and violence, reducing their chances of being productive members of society. Beyond that, as America continues to transition toward a nonwhite country, failure to educate these young men will harm the American economy in the long run. Your advocacy is not just important; it is crucial. Your voice can have a significant impact, unlocking the immense potential of Black male students and contributing to a more

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inclusive and equitable educational landscape. You have the power to make a difference, and your responsibility in this journey is paramount.

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