

# HIGH SCHOOL REFORM AND BLACK MALE STUDENTS

## Limits and Possibilities of Policy and Practice

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*An infusion of federal funding and philanthropic support for high schools has sparked an unprecedented number of educational reforms. Still, few initiatives confront the unique conditions facing Black male students. Despite efforts to reform ineffective schools and foster academic achievement for all students, there continues to be a lingering gap between affluent and poor as well as White and Black subgroups. This article explores the complexities of these issues. The authors examine the negative effects of intractable social barriers such as poverty and ineffective schooling. They suggest that current trends reflect responsible approaches to reform but that the potential role of Black teachers has not been fully explored.*

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**In response to unparalleled** federal support and public interest, an unprecedented number of high school reform efforts have emerged in recent years. High schools are rapidly emerging as the “next frontier” of education reform. Philanthropic agencies such the

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Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Open Society Institute have contributed tens of millions of dollars to innovative programs for reforming American high schools. The recent signing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-11) is anticipated to provide the impetus for even future reforms as State Education Agencies and local districts seek federal funds to broaden the scope of school choice opportunities for parents and students. Although the No Child Left Behind Act is largely an elementary education law, high schools are also required to meet its challenges and reform, if necessary, to address the needs of adolescents who enter unprepared to do high school-level work. Improving high schools is also immensely important because Americans continue to view education as a primary mechanism for redressing inequalities in social life. In this article, we explore trends in high school reform, paying special attention to the conditions of education for Black male adolescents.

Despite efforts to improve ineffective schools and raise academic achievement, there is a well-documented, lingering achievement gap between affluent and poor students as well as between White and Black students (Grissmer & Flanagan, 2001; Jencks & Phillips **OR PHILLIP?**, 1998). Moreover, there is growing evidence that low socioeconomic students of color are disproportionately taught by less qualified teachers and attend deteriorated schools that are racially and socioeconomically isolated (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In the report "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future," Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (National Commission of Teaching and America's Future, 1996) contended students enrolled in high-poverty and racially isolated high schools are unlikely to have classroom teachers with certification or college degrees in their field. Such students, they reported, have less than a 50% probability of taking a course with a math or science teacher holding a state-issued license and undergraduate degree in the field she or he teaches (National Commission of Teaching and America's Future, 1996).

Because the educational system is the sole compulsory institution in the nation, public elementary and secondary schools must absorb disproportionate responsibility for ameliorating the negative effects of inequality in society. Thus, the problems of many

public schools are not necessarily problems that are caused or cured by the schools. They are, instead, rooted in various societal ills such as poverty, social class biases, and institutional racism. Conventional wisdom suggests one of the core purposes of schooling is to embody egalitarian principals such as democracy and the maintenance of an equal opportunity social structure. We believe that an ideal American educational system would be both transformative and reproductive. More specifically, schools should act as a vehicle of social mobility for poor and minority students while simultaneously helping middle-class students reproduce their social status. Good schools encourage at-risk students to surpass the level of education of their parents to obtain social progress (transformative) while allowing affluent students to at least reach the same level as their parents (reproductive).

To be sure, race/ethnicity, social class, and gender play a role in school success or failure (Ogbu, 1988). Gaps in achievement exist across each of these characteristics. However, the extant literature suggests that the subgroup having the most persistent lag is Black male students (Gibbs, 1988; Irvine, 1990; Polite & Davis, 1999). According to Garibaldi (1992), education statistics consistently reveal that Black male students cluster at the bottom of the distribution of virtually every indicator of school failure, such as dropouts, absenteeism, suspension and expulsion, and low standardized test scores.

Recent national trends suggest Black and other minority students continue to be disproportionately enrolled in schools in central cities (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). For many Black high school students, this translates into overrepresentation in large, urban comprehensive or “zoned” schools that are situated in racially isolated and high-poverty areas. Academic achievement and graduation rates at these high schools are often very low in comparison with affluent suburban schools. In the worst cases, less than one quarter of the student body reaches 12th grade on time (Balfanz & Legters, 1998).

In addition, central city districts often have few financial resources, political clout, and social capital among parents and families. In these settings, education is frequently not the only social institution without resources and power. Intergenerational

poverty and cyclical racial isolation have had devastating effects on education, public health, employment, and so forth (Glasgow, 1980; Wilson, 1987). Central cities are often marred by multiple, overlapping social ills such as violence and crime, unemployment, drug abuse, poor public health, and teenage childbirth. Moreover, central city school districts frequently reproduce social inequality rather than transforming it by fostering achievement among all students. Unfortunately, as argued by Jencks and his colleagues (1972), the American educational system has historically legitimated inequality to a far greater extent than it has generated true social mobility.

In light of the intractable nature of concentrated poverty, proliferating urbanization, and racial isolation, many scholars and educators have summarily concluded that little can be done within the context of the existing educational system to significantly improve the conditions for poor students in general and Black male students in particular. Despair about the current conditions of education is at the core of the ongoing school choice debate. As a result, some have advocated for establishing alternatives such as innovative all-male academies aimed at addressing the unique needs of Black males and to buffer them from potential pitfalls. Although controversial, several such academies have been created during past decades, beginning in the Milwaukee Public School District and spreading to other districts throughout the nation. However, the long-term success of Black male academies has not been well established (Narine, 1992).

But how and why did Black male students become a segment of our population who are conspicuously at risk, and why does their level of school failure persist? In addition, why have policy and practice responses to the achievement crisis among Black male students been ineffective on a large scale?

#### AN “ENDANGERED SPECIES”

The concept of Black adolescent male students as endangered is not new. For decades, Black male students have been disproportionately at risk of school failure and diminishing life chances.

Numerous studies have chronicled the troubled status of Black male youth in school and in social life. In the mid 1980s, several authors referred to Black male youth as “endangered species” for these reasons (Gibbs, 1988; Hare, 1987; Hare & Castenell, 1985). The metaphor was based mainly on the increasing numbers of Black men at risk of school failure and in the criminal justice system coupled with their shrinking numbers in the higher education pipeline and in gainful employment. Compared with other groups, Black men have higher dropout rates, lower standardized achievement scores, higher suspension and expulsion rates, higher infant mortality rates, the highest incarceration rates, and the shortest life expectancy (Gibbs, 1998 **OR 1988?**).

What has been the impact of the experiences of Black men on the development of their identity and self-concept? Whether it is perceived failure in the labor market or in educational pursuits, Black men are socialized to view their self-worth as somewhat less than that of others (Hare, 1988 **OR 1987?**) and their locus of control as relatively lower (Parrot **OR PARROTT?**, 1984). Kunjufu (1986) asserted that the social institution that contributes most flagrantly to the destruction of the aspirations of Black men is the public education system. He contended that educational institutions have historically evolved a series of complex features that deny Black men equal access to opportunity. Special education, tracking and ability grouping, and standardized testing are examples of structural educational barriers. In some cases, according to Kunjufu, learning and school engagement gaps between Black men and other groups can be observed as early as the fourth grade. Unfortunately, many Black men never recover from the initial slippage and are relegated to a poor-quality education with few chances for upward mobility.

Considering the normative cultural values embedded in the social, political, and economic institutions of our society, Black men have come to resemble an endangered species. The endangered status of Black males results from a combination of institutional racism, the inertia of intergenerational poverty, and an inability to execute and sustain meaningful educational reform and community development. In the crudest sense and with the exception of a few who are widely admired, young Black males are largely perceived and stereotyped by one or more of the five Ds:

dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed (Gibbs, 1988). Although these words are seldom spoken or written, they can reflect mainstream cultural values and are often reflected in educational policy and practice.

### TRENDS IN HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

For the past decades, terms such as *school reform*, *restructuring*, *redesign*, and *improvement* have dominated educational discourse regarding possible ways of affecting fundamental changes in the schooling experience for at-risk students. Research suggests that these initiatives emerged in several waves (Lusi, 1997). The early waves focused directly on raising standards. Failing schools were often demanded to work harder at doing more of the same. Often, an aspect of these reforms involves replacing the instructional staff members and school leaders without any new creative innovations apart from the traditional models (Petrie **OR PETRI?**, 1990). However, this approach neglected systemic complexities of the educational enterprise. Thus, reform strategies of this sort were often characterized as piecemeal and disconnected (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Smith & O'Day, 1990) because they did little more than tinker with an essentially defective system. For example, such reform efforts left the overall nature of teaching and learning unchanged (Cohen, 1988; Cuban, 1990; Firestone et al., 1989).

Subsequent waves of reform shifted the focus to the redistribution of management and decision making or, similarly, authority and accountability (Murphy, 1992). Here, educational reformers sought to decentralize control of curriculum and/or instruction and management to the local level (Clune & White, 1988 **PLS. PROVIDE REFERENCE**; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). The ideas of site-based management and shared decision making are examples of this. A great strength but also a weakness of these reforms is that school principals were relegated to the role of building managers where they were ultimately held responsible for all aspects of education occurring in their schools. To be successful, principals had to perform the duties of not only instructional lead-

ers but also executives, arbitrators, procurement officers, head counselors, and peacekeepers. Although the goals of these reforms were noble—"to capitalize on the energy and creativity of individuals at the school level" (Murphy, 1992, p. 6)—over time, the pendulum swung in the other direction and many school districts have restocked their central administrative offices.

"Comprehensive" reform is the most recent wave of reforms. This approach has been described as whole-school restructuring aimed at improving the quality of education for at-risk students by altering the deepest organizational structures (Murphy, 1992). Traditional notions of high school structure and functions are ostensibly abandoned in this approach. In addition, the primary function of educational reform is no longer the maintenance of an ineffective, antiquated organizational infrastructure but rather the development of innovative and fundamentally different American high schools (Mojkowski & Fleming, 1988).

A review of the literature by Jordan, McPartland, Legters, and Balfanz (2000) identified the following three main components of comprehensive school reform models in high schools: (a) structural reforms, (b) curriculum and instruction reforms, and (c) professional development reforms. The first component, structural reforms, refers to policies and strategies aimed at changing the social and/or physical organization of the school. They include various initiatives such as career academies, small learning communities, class size reduction, the creation of interdisciplinary teacher teams, and block scheduling. Second, curriculum and instructional reform refers to attempts to improve the content and delivery of core academic subjects. Examples include innovative ways of teaching math and English as well as infusing culturally relevant pedagogy and material into academic courses. Finally, ongoing professional development refers to any number of training activities for teachers and school leaders aimed at helping them to address changing dynamics of educational processes.

Altering school norms and creating a new culture is itself an important component of comprehensive school reform. In breaking down urban high schools into small learning communities, for example, new patterns of relationships and normative structures

emerge. When large, poorly managed schools that are overrun by chaos are restructured into self-contained, small learning communities, expectations for teachers and students are affected by this structural shift. Because smaller elementary and high schools are easier to manage, chaos becomes order (Lee & Loeb, 2000). It becomes relatively easier for teachers and administrators in smaller environments to not only learn the names of all the students with whom they interact during the day but also to know something about what motivates them. Structural changes sometimes help to facilitate a new culture and climate within the school consisting of a warm and caring environment for students. To increase the probability of academic success, however, a school environment conducive to learning must be maintained having high academic press (Jordan et al. 2000). Academic press refers to motivating students to work hard in school and to achieve at high levels.

The *Breaking Ranks* report (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996) suggested that there are numerous challenges facing American high schools regardless of the race/ethnicity, socioeconomic, or cultural characteristics of its students. Several core themes are laid out in *Breaking Ranks* that are central to any short list of school reform initiatives. These themes, or guiding principles, include the following statements:

- High school is, above all else, a learning community and each school must commit itself to expecting demonstrated academic achievement for every student in accord with standards that can stand up to national scrutiny.
- High school must function as a transitional experience, getting each student ready for the next stage of life, whatever it may be for that individual, with the understanding that ultimately, each person needs to earn a living.
- High school must be a gateway to multiple options.
- High school must prepare each student to be a lifelong learner.
- High school must provide an underpinning for good citizenship and for full participation in the life of a democracy.
- High school must play a role in the personal development of young people as social beings having needs beyond those that are strictly academic.
- High school must lay a foundation for students to be able to participate comfortably in an increasingly technological society.

- High school must equip young people for life in a country and a world in which interdependency will link their destiny to that of others, however different those others may be from them.
- High school must be an institution that unabashedly advocates on behalf of young people.

Each of these general principles represents broad ideas or attainable goals for high schools attempting to prepare all adolescents for higher education and adult life, apparently, irrespective of the background characteristics and cultural traditions of the students. We cite excerpts from *Breaking Ranks* not as hard and fast rules that should be applied to high school reform but instead as noteworthy beliefs about how schools should work, appropriate outcomes, and the basis for promising reform strategies frequently appearing throughout the research and policy literature. Although these principles can be seen as common goals of high school reform, it should be stressed that no specific reference is made to whether or how racial/ethnic and gender issues influence or alter the implementation process.

#### **BLACK TEACHERS AND SCHOOL REFORM: JOINING TWO DEBATES**

The extant educational literature contains a number of policy and practice recommendations for educating Black men that begs an important question: What can be done within the context of school reform to improve the overall achievement and school success for Black male students? Whereas high school reform is gradually taking into account various strategies for improving school structure, curriculum and/or instruction, and professional development, the issue of race and culture within the context of comprehensive reform has been largely ignored.

The broader issue of how staffing, especially teachers, affects a school's capacity for change has occurred separately from the discourse on comprehensive school reform. In this vein, we argue that if the current wave of high school reform is to make a positive difference in the overall schooling experiences of Black men, an

important issue must be addressed: the recruitment of Black male teachers. This issue is rooted in research findings suggesting that race congruence and cultural synchronization may make a difference in motivating Black students to learn.

We have suggested that there is an apparent disconnection between the current discourse on school reform, on one hand, and teacher quality on the other. The issue of recruiting Black teachers has been part of the latter debate but not the former. However, each of these issues are inextricably linked. Yet, in view of teacher shortages and volatile turnover rates, high school reform initiatives are often unable to affect teacher recruitment. Concern is often focused on specific practices to be implemented, such as building small learning communities and using cooperative learning techniques, with less attention being paid to potentially important characteristics of the implementers.

However, teacher background characteristics are critical factors in the success or failure of high school reform. In addition, ascriptive characteristics such as gender and ethnicity/race as well as achieved factors such as certification, education level, and experience are also important. Several scholars have written about the implications of cultural and social distances between students and teachers (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rist, 1970). Rist's (1970) landmark study of elementary school classrooms illustrated that even in situations in which both teachers and students are Black, social class plays a role in how teachers formulate perceptions of their students' ability. Also, although Irvine (1990) suggested that "cultural synchronization" between students and teachers is a motivating factor for Black students to achieve, this body of research has not sufficiently permeated the prevailing discussions of comprehensive school reform, at least not outside the domain of curriculum and pedagogy.

Although researchers have not yet joined the discourse on teacher quality and recruitment with high school reform and policy makers have not targeted the unique needs of Black men, we believe prevailing models of reform represent a responsible way of improving schools for many at-risk students. There is mounting evidence that student engagement and achievement is positively

affected by improvements in school structure, curriculum and teaching, and professional development (Jordan et al., 2000). However, as ineffective high schools slowly improve, the distribution of academic success within the school can be relatively unaffected. In other words, as the school begins to manifest positive signs of improvement as a result of reform efforts, the achievement levels by race/ethnic and socioeconomic status subgroups remain largely unchanged. Thus, the gap between Black men and other subgroups remain intact.

To advance research and development on the core principles of comprehensive school reform, we believe the limits and possibilities of Black male teachers ought to be taken into account. More research is needed to explicate the effects of the recruitment of Black male teachers in high school on the achievement and motivation of Black male students. Empirical evidence on this relationship is lacking as little scholarly attention has been focused on this subject. We are cognizant of the fact, however, that this issue is controversial. Increasing the number of Black male teachers for the purpose of addressing the needs of Black male students can be seen as abandoning the integration ideal of the civil rights movement.

Nevertheless, our assertion is based partly on cultural synchronization theory coupled with an understanding that overall teacher quality and effectiveness always trumps racial congruence between students and teachers. That is, effective teachers of any racial/ethnic background are more preferable for raising motivation and achievement generally and particularly among Black male students than are unqualified Black teachers. However, having stated this, Black male teachers perhaps have several important advantages in educating Black adolescents. These include, for example, strategic use of shared knowledge, modeling appropriate behavior, and in some cases, common social experiences. The rapport Black male teachers can rapidly establish with Black male students through their common cultural heritage can be maintained in the face of social class differences. The value-added dimension of being exposed to good teachers who are Black men might be a key factor in raising the probability of success for some Black male students.

### TEACHER-STUDENT CULTURAL CONGRUENCE

Several notable scholars have compiled research-based strategies as well as policy recommendations for fostering achievement among Black students in general (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lomotey, 1990; Shujaa, 1996; Willie, Garibaldi, & Reed, 1991). However, findings from this body of research have not influenced discussions of school reform to a large extent. Perhaps one of the reasons why is because researchers and policy makers struggle with the implications of culturally relevant teaching and learning. On one hand, there is recognition by the educational research community that many Black children and adolescents may need potent interventions to succeed in school. Beliefs of this nature often evolve into notions of whole-school reform strategies. Yet on the other hand, only courageous policy makers, researchers, and practitioners advocate for cultural congruence between students and teachers or racially and/or culturally specific, or targeted, curriculum and instruction. If, for example, exposing Black male students to Black male teachers who can act as role models and establish rapport and credibility with them is shown to be an effective strategy for bolstering student motivation, what are the policy implications of this vis-à-vis our current knowledge that in the real world, very few teachers of Black boys are Black men? Furthermore, what are potential ramifications of embracing the idea of cultural congruence within the context of a pluralistic society that ostensibly values and celebrates diversity? How would increasing the number of Black male teachers to teach Black male students avoid or reconcile the appearance of advocacy for a return to segregation?

Answers to questions such as these may spawn several controversial research questions because they not only relate to reducing the race gap but also are embedded in deep-seeded egalitarian values and opinions concerning race relations in the United States.

The discourse on high school reform is occurring separate and apart from new knowledge about cultural relevancy and the education of Black adolescents. Conceivably, this is a result of a widespread philosophy among school reformers that effective education should be culturally neutral or benign neglect of the unique cultural needs of Black students in classrooms and schoolhouses. As men-

tioned earlier, there is evidence that race and cultural background of teachers do, in fact, play a role in the education of Black students (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Neglecting the role of culture in educating children and adolescents is somewhat explained by Irvine's (1990) notion of "cultural aversion," which she described as a general reluctance of educators to consider race and race-related issues such as equality, prejudice, discrimination, and social justice. According to Irvine,

This color-blind philosophy is linked to educators' uncomfortableness in discussing race, their lack of knowledge of cultural heritage of their students' peers, and their fears and anxieties that open consideration of differences might incite racial discord or perhaps upset a fragile, often unpredictable, racial harmony. (p. 26).

Instead, there is a preference among many researchers, educators, and policy makers to focus on the broad issues pertaining to school reform and improvement as if they were devoid of cultural implications.

Increasing achievement and school engagement for all students, regardless of racial/ethnic background or gender, has been a key impetus of recent waves of school reform to be sure. Ultimately, the primary aim of educational reform is to affect positive changes in the structure, curriculum and instruction, and professional development agenda of urban high schools. There is a general understanding that at-risk students are culturally and ethnically diverse as well as disproportionately Black, yet we have not developed adequate policies and practices for taking full advantage of students' cultural histories. Whereas multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy and/or curriculum are steadily penetrating school reform, there is little evidence to date of a significant impact on the achievement and school success of Black male students.

Notwithstanding the lack of studies demonstrating direct effects on standardized achievement levels, there is considerable research evidence documenting and underscoring the importance of cultural relevancy in the education of Black students and fostering their overall school success (Boykin, 1987 **OR 1996?**; Hopkins, 1997; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; and others). However, as

mentioned earlier, a real-world challenge for proponents of multicultural education and cultural relevancy in education as well as proponents of whole-school reform is that many reform strategies presume no change in the existing classroom teachers. The reason why this assumption is made is out of the recognition that effective teachers and school leaders are in short supply and high demand. Moreover, the professional development of teachers around issues of cultural competence is labor intensive and rarely successful on a large scale. In addition, as standards for achievement will continue to rise as states implement the No Child Left Behind Act, schools and districts are, out of necessity, increasingly focusing professional development activities on subject- or content-specific training, often linked to particular state or national assessments. Future professional development agendas are likely to continue to focus on subject matter at the expense of other topics such as cultural relevancy or rethinking teacher and student interactions. Although focusing on core content areas in high school rightfully deserves high priority, it is somewhat uncertain how teachers would have sufficient opportunity for professional development centered on the cultural diversity among their students.

The importance of studying micro processes such as specific teacher-student interactions within the classroom and the implications and effects of this interaction on student achievement and engagement have been long established (Brophy & Good, 1974). Studies addressing issues such as teacher expectancies (Dusek, 1975; Elashoff & Snow, 1971; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1978; Rist, 1970) and cultural synchronization between teachers and students (Irvine, 1990) cast light on the degree to which ascriptive factors such as race-ethnicity, gender, and social class can influence student learning. However, developing strategies for mitigating the effects of low expectancies, cultural ambivalence, or general misunderstandings between teachers and students can be a complicated and arduous task. In fact, success is often fleeting and difficult to sustain. This is primarily because attempts to change expectancies and cultural sensitivities cut to the core of teachers and other school personnel as individuals as well as the social conditions students face in school and in their community. For example, in the case of at-risk Black male students, teacher expectancies

are often low because the resources teachers have at their disposal to bring to bear on the multiple problems faced by them are woefully inadequate. Irrespective of what teachers may think about individual Black boys or Black men as a whole, they are keenly aware of the overlapping social, economic, and political barriers to their success. Thus, there is a widespread belief that Black students in general must “beat the odds” if they are to achieve educational success.

### **THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF BLACK MALE TEACHERS**

High school reformers are often asked to assume current staffing resources in attempting to support failing schools. Moreover, struggling schools that serve large percentages of at-risk students tend to have the most difficult time attracting and retaining good teachers (Oakes, 1985, 1986). But in a race-conscious society (such as ours), cultural synchronization can be an important aspect of teaching and learning (Irvine, 1990). Teachers who have shared knowledge and understandings with students can be better equipped in solving students’ problems and motivating them to learn.

We believe, however, that increasing the number of Black male teachers alone is not the answer. Instead, we suggest that shared cultural knowledge (endowed as a result of being a member of the same racial and gender group) can provide a value-added dimension of teaching and learning, holding constant a teacher’s ability to teach, credentials, and level of experience. Perhaps a wrinkle in this conjecture is that although Black male teachers and Black male students may share common cultural experiences, teachers are virtually, by definition, middle class. Complete cultural congruence or synchronization between Black teachers and Black students almost never exists and can have possible drawbacks. For example, there are many racially isolated schools having many Black teachers where Black male students consistently fail. Here, the persistent underperformance of Black male students can perhaps be explained by a combination of factors such as inadequate resources, unstable leadership, low teacher quality, and a host of student inputs such as

the intractable conditions brought on by poverty. Thus, although there is a potential for positive influences, recruiting Black male teachers to teach Black male students cannot be viewed as a panacea.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Many Black male adolescents are at risk of educational failure as a result of a complex array of institutional and socioeconomic factors they face within their schools and the communities in which they live. These current social and educational conditions have historical linkages and indeed are intergenerational. Effective policies and strong interventions are needed to improve the plight of Black men in society. Within a broader framework, it is important to keep in mind that problems that manifest within school are not always school problems per se. Black men are not only disproportionately at risk of school failure but also at risk of many other outcomes such as infant mortality, poor public health, drug abuse, crime and legal problems, and unemployment (Gibbs, 1988). For this reason, multiple institutions serving Black communities must seek remedies for shrinking the social mobility and achievement gap between Black men and other groups. We are somewhat optimistic that of the institutions Black men encounter, schools, which are the sole compulsory institution, appear to be the most malleable to change. Despite the challenges outlined, high schools can be reformed and improved via policy and leadership that is guided by research and theory.

There is cause for hope that high schools attempting to prepare Black men for adult life can be reformed into more effective organizations succeeding at helping greater numbers achieve academically, but broader aspects of social life are more difficult to assess. There is considerable evidence suggesting communities themselves and other social institutions such as the criminal justice system and public assistance agencies are far more resistant to change than are public schools. This is most apparent in racially isolated communities where concentrations of poverty have existed for generations. To be sure, the devastating effects of poverty are often

intractable, not only for educators but also for public health, social service, and housing and workforce development agencies.

At the outset, we mentioned that educational institutions must shoulder a disproportionate amount of responsibility for ameliorating inequality in society. American high schools, ideally, should provide a vehicle of social mobility for at-risk adolescents students while reproducing academic success (and ultimately social status) for middle-class students. Children of school dropouts need desperately to go beyond the attainment level of their parents to lead successful adult lives, and children of Ivy League graduates strive to duplicate their parents' educational accomplishments.

A caveat is that many researchers view educational and social mobility as a zero-sum game (Jencks et al., 1972). Success for one individual reduces the probability of success for another. The institution of education mimics the economy in several respects, including its inverted pyramidal structure with wide clusters of individuals at the bottom and much fewer at the top (Hare, 1987). Many people earn high school diplomas, a smaller number have college degrees, fewer still earn master's degrees, and a relatively tiny percentage earn doctorates and advanced professional degrees. Similarly, there are many minimum wage workers and few millionaires. Thus, it is difficult to conceive of a truly egalitarian educational system that truly leaves no child behind without reconceptualizing broader social, economic, and political structures.

Suppose, for example, that school dropout was eliminated and that every high school graduate was suddenly qualified to attend college. Assume further that state and federal financial aid for higher education was available for every applicant who requested it in the amount necessary to cover all costs. Even if this were to happen, we do not have an American higher education infrastructure to support such an influx of new students.

Furthermore, endeavoring to reform schools without simultaneously strengthening the community in which they are located is like attempting to filter the air in a room with the windows open (Anyon, 1995). As posited by Waller (1932), the community is the whole and the school is fragment. However, educational politics along with complex bureaucracy and institutionalism causes us to

lose sight of the fragmentary nature of schooling in social life. As a result, school reform initiatives are often narrowly focused on creating more effective schoolhouses, paying little attention to the demographics and cultural backgrounds of the student population.

In the case of Black men, many well-intentioned reform agendas have missed the mark. Many Black men face daunting challenges in school just as they are at risk in the larger spheres of society. It is due, in part, to historical and ongoing inequality in society and institutionalized racism. The criminalization of Black men such as in racial profiling, the continual disparaging media images challenged by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the overrepresentation of Black men in state and federal prisons are similar phenomena that are inextricably linked to educational at-risk conditions.

The strategies often used in high school reform represent a responsible but incomplete approach to addressing the needs of Black male adolescents. Certainly, the overall quality of a school, as measured by its structure or organization, curriculum and/or instruction, and professional development are critical factors. Also, the quality, effectiveness, and commitment of teachers are paramount issues. But holding these things constant, the cultural issues affecting Black men and the possibilities and limits of bringing in Black male teachers should be given thorough consideration and further study. At this point, the missing components of comprehensive school reform are the lack of attention paid to the cultural uniqueness of Black men and the relative shortage of Black male teachers.

We end this article with a general recommendation for research and policy. That is, the aim of future research and policy ought to involve strategies of incorporating the recruitment of Black male teachers into the development of school reform initiatives, particularly at critical transition points of schooling. Some combination of new studies analyzing and synthesizing national and state statistics along with qualitative case studies would be needed to accomplish this. Ultimately, addressing this charge would involve merging at least two separate bodies of research literature that thus far are largely disconnected. Further research and development involving the potential value-added benefits of racial congruence and cultural

synchronization for educating Black men would be insightful and may go a long way in refining models of high school reform and improving student outcomes.

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