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The Relationship Between Black Racial Identity and Academic Achievement in Urban Settings

This article examines the relationship between Black racial identity and academic achievement in urban settings. Using Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1918) as a comparative framework, the author describes current practices and suggests practical applications of empirical findings for practicing classroom teachers of African American students. Specifically, the article identifies an appreciation of the historical context for Black racial identity development and an acknowledgment of within-group diversity among African American adolescents as key in the development of a healthy racial identity.

Theoretical Framework

EARLY IN LIFE, CHILDREN SEEK to define themselves based upon characteristics such

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as personality, physical attributes, ethnic orientation, and other distinct traits (Moshman, 1999). This thought process reflects the natural progression of identity development. As young people grow into adolescence, identity development is manifested in the introspective examination of life goals, belief systems, and a sense of individual purpose (Arnett, 2001). Erikson (1968), among others, viewed identity development as the central issue of adolescence.

Although all people participate in the exploration and experimentation behaviors that lead to identity development, there is reason to believe that, for people of color, this developmental process reveals itself differently than for Whites. This group must formulate an identity that encompasses individual personality factors against the backdrop of the ethnic group to which they belong. The search for a comprehensive racial identity is one that imbues the individual with a sense of belongingness and pride, evidenced in the fact that identity renewal was a major theme and driving force in the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Cross, 1998). For people of color, the term *racial identity* encompasses more than a person's categorization

based on physical traits, it entails a “sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1990, p. 3). This perception of commonality reflects knowledge of a “common thread of historical experience and a sense that each member of the collectivity, regardless of how distinct he or she may be, somehow shares in this historical experience” (p. 4).

Early Black racial identity research, in particular that conducted by Eugene and Ruth Horwitz (1939) and Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1939), suggested that Black self-hatred manifested in a preference for white over Black among African American children. Until the early 1970s, researchers corroborated these findings, producing data that seemingly indicated a swell of empirical support for the Black self-hatred hypothesis (Porter, 1971). However, with the onset of the Black Consciousness movement, the identity and consciousness of African Americans was effectively transformed through the “redefinition of the constituent groups’ identities and political consciousness” (Cole & Stewart, 1996, p. 99). The end result was such that the new emphasis on racial dignity and self-reliance caused many Blacks to see themselves in a new, drastically more positive manner than that reflected in the early racial identity literature.

Although there is relatively little achievement motivation research that focuses solely on African American students and the relationship between ethnic identity beliefs and achievement beliefs and behaviors, existing models of race and achievement may be categorized in a manner similar to the differentiation between models of racial identity: those that view racial group membership as a prohibitive factor towards academic achievement, and less pessimistic models that view racial group identification as fostering academic achievement (Chavous et al., 2003).

This review examines the intricate relationship between Black racial identity and academic achievement for students who attend school in urban settings. Because Black adolescents are not a monolithic group, it would stand to reason that there is a great deal of complexity involved in

understanding Black racial identity development and its relation to both successful and unsuccessful African American students (Ford, 1992). Rather than focus on correlations between measures of racial identity and achievement-related outcomes like grade point average and standardized test scores, I investigate the urban environment and the manner in which it shapes Black racial identity. In doing so, it is my goal to stress the importance of building a healthy racial identity and clarify the manner in which this can be accomplished in urban schools.

The Work of Our Hands

In her epic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelley’s disenfranchised outcast offered words that find a curiously insightful application to the discussion of race and schooling:

You are in the wrong, and instead of threatening, I am content to reason with you. I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, who would tear me to pieces and triumph, remember that and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me? You would not call it murder if you could precipitate me into one of those ice-rifts and destroy my frame, the work of your own hands. Shall I respect man when he condemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and instead of injury I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be, the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union. But mine shall not be the submission of abject slavery. I will revenge my injuries; if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear. (pp. 134–135)

Victor Frankenstein’s creation is defined by his environment. The reaction to his presence within that context is largely negative, which inspires an unhealthy self-conception. This is compounded by the perception of an apathetic populace who expend a great deal of time and energy plotting his demise. Despite this, the being remains open to the prospect of sharing his strengths and talents

in a productive union. There is, however, a distinct word of warning; his continued rejection will initiate behaviors in direct opposition to the establishment of harmony between peoples.

To what extent does the environment at urban schools shape the self-concept of Black students? There are a number of ways in which school personnel may unwittingly contribute to both optimistic and pessimistic racial self-concept. Specifically, classroom teachers have been described as the “face” of the school, exerting their influence through their choice of instructional materials and curriculum, the physical arrangement of the room and the use of verbal and nonverbal cues that communicate acceptance or rejection (Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003). Preliminary studies have suggested that cooperative learning practices, mixed ability grouping, and the use of instructional strategies and materials that consider the unique perspective of African American students relate to a positive racial self-concept, although more extensive analysis of this relationship is needed (Walberg & Genova, 1983).

Unfortunately, there is also ample evidence of negative practices that impede the formation of a healthy racial identity and undermine achievement-related efforts among Black students. Although the *contact hypothesis* argues that an integrated school setting is more likely to promote positive ethnic attitudes among all children than one that is racially homogeneous, the majority of urban schools are still heavily segregated (Kozol, 2005). Further, teachers are often inundated with a view of Black students and the urban communities in which they live, which emphasizes a *deficit paradigm*, placing the blame for urban school failure with students, their families, and their culture (Weiner, 2003). This perspective emphasizes an overly controlling, punitive approach to teaching Black students, which undermines the implementation of cooperative and innovative pedagogical practices. It is feasible that these practices, far from encouraging a positive link between Black racial identity and academic achievement, are at least partially responsible for a disruption in the link between urban students’ construction of a Black racial identity and academic achievement.

The underperformance of African American students relevant to their white peers has been well documented in the literature (Haycock, 2001). According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, White high school students outperform African American students in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and U.S. history. Researchers generally fall into one of two perspectives when attempting to explain this discrepancy: one that contends that Black racial identity impedes academic success and one that asserts that Black racial identity facilitates achievement (Chavous et al., 2003).

Those models of the former perspective argue that African American youth come to recognize existing systemic barriers to their success and subsequently distance themselves from behaviors that would ensure educational success because of a belief that these behaviors are unlikely to lead to success and prosperity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004). Further, researchers who operate out of this paradigm assert that African American students tend to devalue domains in which Blacks have traditionally been unsuccessful, thus protecting one’s self-esteem against failure (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Hughes & Demo, 1989). Because of (inaccurate) perceptions of a lack of academic ability among people of color, some African American students come to reject achievement related attitudes and behaviors; as a result, the correlation between self-esteem and academic outcomes decreases steadily among African American students (especially boys) over time (Osborne, 1997). These students may deliberately reject academic achievement as *acting white*, instead choosing to play the role of class clown or embracing other modes of creative expression embraced more readily by one’s African American peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004). Subsequently, self-efficacy for academic achievement (one’s domain-specific confidence in their ability to successfully accomplish academic tasks) is lower among African American students than among white students, even though it has no relation to the self-esteem of Black students (the affective

judgments of one's self-worth; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995).

Similarly, *stereotype threat*, or the situational threat that stems from the prevailing image of African Americans as intellectually inferior, places an emotional and cognitive burden on the individual's self-concept, as the threat of conforming to the damaging antiintellectual stereotype produces high levels of anxiety that negatively influence personal agency beliefs and performance in academic settings (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998; Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Individuals who identify with African Americans—those for whom being Black is a core element of their self-concept—are more susceptible to stereotype threat than those who do not (Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

A number of African American students combat the potential for stereotype threat by utilizing a *racelessness* strategy (Fordham, 1988, 1996; Tatum, 1997). In doing so, Blacks take on the mannerisms, attitudes, and characteristics not generally associated with African American culture, deliberately downplaying an association with the Black community (Fordham, 1988). Unfortunately, many high achieving African American students use this strategy, which often results in feelings of discomfort based upon the ridicule they suffer at the hands of other African Americans (Fordham, 1996). Other researchers have found a significant relationship between the utilization of racelessness as a strategy and depression among African American adolescents (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). Further, Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke (1998) found that students who adopted a position of racelessness evidenced a lower level of academic achievement than did those students who expressed a more profound attachment to other African Americans. This strategy of racelessness is costly in terms of well being, even when it is somewhat successful in terms of fostering achievement, and achievement is far from guaranteed when this strategy is employed.

Conversely, a second perspective asserts that a deliberate, self-chosen affiliation with African American culture as a positive decision towards

academic success. There is a noteworthy historic basis for the link between African American culture and academic valuation and achievement (Anderson, 1988; Cross, Strauss, & Fhagen-Smith, 1999). Additionally, students of African American parents who socialize their children to be aware of racially-motivated barriers to their future success attained higher grades than those students who did not receive Black socialization messages from their parents (Murray, Stokes, & Peacock, 1999). Further, an awareness of the evils of racism and discrimination may prompt African American students to develop alternate modes of expression, as compared with those of the mainstream, embracing events, symbols, and meanings that allow them to experience a positive, *healthy* self-concept (Tatum, 1997).

It is likely that examining the components that comprise Black racial identity rather than considering ethnic racial identity as a unitary conception may determine its relationship with academic achievement. Witherspoon, Speight, and Thomas (1997) examined the relationship among racial identity, self-esteem, academic self-concept, and academic achievement for 86 African American high school students. They found that a variety of racial identity attitudes existed within the high school student population among those students with a high academic self-concept, high levels of self-esteem, and a high level of academic achievement. Some of the African American students in the sample responded in a manner that indicated pride in the race was a constructive tool towards academic achievement; the responses of others indicated a fear that endorsement of academic-related events and attitudes would indicate a departure from African American culture. The authors concluded that many African American students are struggling simultaneously with issues of racial identity and academic achievement (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Witherspoon et al., 1997).

The Interchange of Kindness

Because the overwhelming majority of support for the relationship between Black racial

identity and academic achievement has been gleaned for survey-based research, the direction, strength, and interpretation of the correlation remains under debate. Subsequently, the practical application of these findings to classroom practices is often unclear. This review of the literature promotes two broad themes which, when applied in the classroom, will contribute to the construction of a Black sense of self and support the argument for a positive relationship between racial identity and academic achievement.

Provide an Historical Context

In his model of racial identity development, William Cross (1991, 1995, 1998; Cross et al., 1999) asserted that African Americans progress through a series of stages with regard to the development of an ethnic identity. According to Cross (1991), an individual begins in a state of naiveté (which he termed the *pre-encounter stage*), undergoes an experience in which Blackness is made salient, and ultimately develops to a point at which his or her “sense of racial group identity is enhanced and one’s conception of what it means to be Black becomes a backdrop for life’s transactions” (p. 72). As such, this final stage (termed the *internalization stage*) has been described as having a beneficial influence on academic achievement.

It is vital that this final, internalized conception of what it means to be Black be couched in a context of pride, effort, and achievement. Cross’s model provides a clear entry point at which classroom teachers can intervene and promote this construction. The encounter experience, where a traumatic, racially prejudiced event occurs that shakes young people from a raceless persona is, according to Cross (1991), the crux upon which future perceptions of what it means to be Black are formed. When this happens, classroom teachers might draw students’ attention to the manner in which African Americans have utilized their intellectual resources to combat the impact of racism and discrimination. The architects of the Black consciousness movement—Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Stokley Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, and scores of others—employed intellect

and effort towards redefining the way in which they were perceived and the systematic inequities against which they struggled. In urban classrooms where a perceived absence of resources and regard may be interpreted as the manifestation of discrimination, these forerunners provide a balm for the demeaning sting of racism, an achievement-friendly blueprint for the alleviation of unfair and exclusionary treatment, and a model of positive Black racial identity.

Promote Within-Group Variability

Robert Sellers’ (Sellers et al., 1998) model of Black racial identity assumes individual differences in the perception of what it means to be Black. According to this perspective, African American racial self-concept is comprised of four components: *racial centrality* (the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of race), *racial salience* (the extent to which race is a relevant aspect of one’s self-concept at a particular moment in time), *public regard* (one’s perception of others’ view of African Americans), and *private regard* (the effective and evaluative judgments that one forms regarding his or her race). This model asserts that African Americans likely embrace a number of different ideologies relative to the demands of particular situations and environments.

Much has been written about the existence of a so-called oppositional identity among African American students. According to this hypothesis, students embrace behaviors and attitudes consistent with academic underachievement as a means of validating an *authentic* Black identity. This framework assumes the presence and propitiation of a unitary conception of Blackness. Those who dare to exhibit any within-group variability in their expression of race are harangued as *acting White*. Black urban teachers, who, themselves, exhibit a wide range of interests and talents, are in a perfect position to rebut this notion. As they invite their students to investigate nonstereotypical expressions of self, they encourage the reconceptualization of what it means to be Black. This, in turn, lessens the appeal of an oppositional conception of race in favor of

a wider, more expansive Black identity, in which hard work and achievement are accepted as consistent with one's racial self-concept.

The Afrocentric model of instruction suggests a practical way to implement these two goals. Grounded in African American culture and history, this approach encourages children to structure their behaviors, values, and attitudes towards school in a manner that emphasizes cooperation, respect, and commitment. This philosophy is not anti-White, but instead steeped in a rich cultural legacy of Black excellence. Schools that incorporate an Afrocentric curriculum provide instruction in Black history, cultural and political awareness, self-regulation, and community service in an effort to encourage African American students to view their ethnic identity in a positive manner.

There are a number of practical components to this approach. One obvious dimension involves the selection of reading materials that reflect an Afrocentric perspective. From such narratives, Black students will come to understand that the pursuit of education, manifested in the lives and experiences of those with whom they share a common racial heritage, is "intense, persistent and supported and fueled by an explicit and continually articulated belief system" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 48). This will also introduce young people to a range of perspectives and expressions to be found within the cultural body, be it the rugged self-determination of a Malcolm X, the dogged determination of Septima Clark, the wry insightfulness of a Ralph Wiley, or that of many, many others. These narratives "are powerfully implicated in the identity formation of African Americans as learners and intellectual beings" (Perry et al., 2003, p. 50).

Additionally, classroom teachers of urban Black students need to emphasize the relevance of their students' culture and experiences to the intellectual canon. Too often, this segment of the population is made to feel as if they have nothing of value to contribute. Assante (1991) termed this *Hegemonic education*—the belief that Africans and other non-White groups have never produced anything of worth to aid the cause of world civilization. Instead, the Afrocentric model emphasizes the contributions of Blacks in all vital areas

of the country's establishment as a world power. From the perspective of identity development, this accomplishes two important goals: It validates the words and lives of one's predecessors, and affords a space for the individual expressions of the present.

Further, the utilization of cooperative learning strategies supports the development of a healthy Black racial identity and encourages the achievement-related efforts of urban students. Previous studies have reported a narrowing of the achievement gap between Black and White students in classrooms that employ cooperative learning strategies (Slavin, 1991). Although competitive classrooms may exacerbate the tension between peer approval and academic performance among African American students, collaborative efforts promote high regard for oneself and one's peers, facilitate the development of self-determination, and increase the likelihood of academic achievement. Cooperative group learning is also supportive of the link between the development of a healthy Black racial identity and achievement, in that it enhances self-worth and satisfies a need for affiliation while simultaneously promoting academic goals.

These strategies have been used in a number of urban classrooms across the country to great success. *Visions for Children*, an urban elementary-school program formerly funded by the Council for Economic Opportunities in Greater Cleveland, incorporated African American literature, materials, and themes in an effort to convey pride and confidence in Black children. The program resulted in measurable gains in cognitive abilities, reading readiness, and achievement-oriented skills among urban students. Additionally, Black children who took part in this program were found to score higher on measures of self-esteem than did an equivalent group of Black children who did not take part in the program, a difference that was remarkably persistent over a period of 6 years (Hale, 1994). Hale used the words of Mary McCleod Bethune to describe a key thrust of the program:

When they learn the fairy tales of mythical kings and queens, we must let them hear of

the Pharaohs and African kings and the brilliant pageantry of the Valley of the Nile; when they learn of Caesar and his legions, we must teach them of Hannibal and his Africans; when they learn of Shakespeare and Goethe, we must teach them of Pushkin and Dumas. (p. 188)

With respect to the validation of Black students' cultural capital, Ball (2000) described a vibrant, urban middle school class discussion. In this example, the link between Black racial identity development and academic achievement is encouraged through this classroom teacher's practice of validating student experiences and perspectives while simultaneously holding them accountable to a high standard of excellence:

This third teacher engaged her students in discussions about their life situations and about their perceptions of themselves in the world, but she also challenged them to consider their education as a tool to move them toward political action for themselves and for others. (This teacher) used language that was familiar and friendly, which expanded on the ideas that students brought up. She clearly challenges them to reconsider matters of how they perceive themselves and the world and to develop the capabilities to set some goals and accomplish them. (pp. 1022–1023)

Third, Ladson-Billings (1994) described one urban sixth-grade teacher's use of cooperative learning and the process of forming a "viable social community" (p. 40). This teacher's efforts to establish a cooperative community in her classroom supports positive regard for other African Americans and a sense of shared purpose and destiny as Black people:

They have to care about each other and to depend upon one another before we can really get anything meaningful accomplished. We have to have a sense of family, of "teamness." When we see ourselves as a team that works together, we can do anything. Having a kind of team spirit helps them to understand that one's person's success is success for them all and that one person's failure is failure for everybody. (pp. 40–41)

Although this is by no means an exhaustive outline of successful practices, all three classroom reflections illustrate ways in which urban teachers who are interested in strengthening the link between a positive Black sense of self and a high level of academic achievement may do so.

Injuries and Warnings

Urban schools are uniquely positioned to contribute to the development of racial identity. In many instances, they are the primary force in the socialization of Black adolescents. If this process culminates in the internalization of a positive racial self-concept, students are likely to internalize behaviors and attitudes that contribute to academic achievement. When this process is coopted by ignorance and inflexibility, the end result is the adoption of a view of Black racial identity that impedes the process of teaching and learning. Although the terminology used to describe this unfortunate state of affairs may change—*oppositional identity*, *cool pose*, *alienated*—the result is the same: a reinforcement of the disproportionate academic underachievement of Black urban students.

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