

# Building resilience in African American males during pursuit of higher education

## Abstract

This paper presents a brief historical look at education for young African American men from the post-Civil War era to the present. It explores reasons why education for this group has become a less favorable aspiration than when education became available to them. Changing role models are strong factors that negatively influence school participation and excellence. Suggestions for ways to instill resilience in young African American men to excel academically are offered, as well as areas for further study.

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## Introduction

Post slavery, the pursuit of higher education for African Americans was a community requirement. Those who were destined for success in the halls of academia were often called The Talented Tenth, a term that originated in 1896 in the American Baptist Home Mission Society, a White philanthropy society that wanted to establish Black colleges in the South to train Black teachers, and was later promoted by W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>1</sup> in a profound essay. The Talented Tenth referred to the top 10% of African American men who succeeded beyond the expectations of the prevailing culture at that time, who would be transformed by education to evoke social change through writing books and community activism. Du Bois, stressing a strong classical, intellectual education, differed from Black scientist Booker T Washington,<sup>2</sup> who saw scientific application through industrial education, which had a strong corporate component.<sup>3</sup> The term Talented Tenth later included Black women and produced Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Barack Obama, and Maxine Waters, among many other well-educated Black community leaders.

Though this seemed to be a positive step for African American communities as a hope to raise up the plight of the people within their neighborhoods, it soon became a drawback when the Talented Tenth started to move out of African American communities in urban and rural areas, in pursuit of more of the American dream, never to return. With their physical exit came the loss of accessible, touchable role models for those African American males remaining who sought to follow in the footsteps of those Talented Tenth achievers.

Other icons began to fill the space left by these academic talents: athletes and entertainers. Today, the concept of being an African American male with the goal of going to college has taken on a much different connotation. For them, it is like having an emblazoned scarlet letter upon their brows, except now it is not an A but an N, the initial of the disparaging moniker for making an A: a Nerd. What is missing for many of these young Black males is the support and internal resilience to stay on the road to and through academia even when they are made fun of and scolded with the ever-stigmatizing salute: "You are a nerd!"

Education was always seen as the great equalizer for African Americans looking for a means to catch up to Whites both socially and economically in American and beyond. This desire was the genesis for the Brown vs. the Board of Education lawsuit that was heard by the United States Supreme Court in 1954 that ultimately disintegrated the notion of separate but equal schools for Blacks and Whites.<sup>4,5</sup> However, the belief of those in the greater African American community was simple: once their children were allowed to attend schools with White children, they would then have the same access and resources and could rise to levels of success their own families had no opportunity to achieve before. History, however, continues to prove this assumption was naive and wistful, based on the challenges African Americans continue to face in integrated schools. African American boys are being suspended and disciplined at a greater rate than White boys.<sup>5</sup> In addition, many Black students have been disproportionately accessed and placed in special education classes to a point where the court banned schools in California, Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington from assessing African American males for even learning disabilities.<sup>6</sup> That ruling, fortunately, was overturned so that Black students could be assessed and receive services that they needed.

## History of value of education in the african american community

Before the end of the American Civil War, a learned African was non-existent, particularly in the South. The idea of bondservants trying to educate themselves was considered a criminal endeavor, the punishment of which was severe, even to being sentenced to death (Anderson, 2017). It was not until the Reconstruction era (1867-77) that formerly enslaved men and women had access to education.<sup>7</sup> Under the Reconstruction Act of 1867, a military governed leash was placed on the South where politicians faced the daunting task of uniting a divided country along with deciding how severe the punishment of former Confederate states should be for seceding the Union. It was under this act that former slaves acquired new rights and opportunities, such as equality before the law, the right to own property, vote, marry legally, attend school, enter professions, and

learn to read and write. As this was the first time state government took steps to provide adequate public schools in the South, many former slaves jumped at the opportunity to educate themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Aided by White philanthropists and missionaries from the North, free Blacks and some southern Whites, started building schoolhouses, hiring teachers, and buying textbooks—many of which were created specifically for freed slaves.<sup>3</sup> Commonly referred to as freedmen's texts, these textbooks, as well as others, portrayed Blacks as inferior. Learning, as it is in any era, reflects a society's attitudes and values, and thus these texts, despite the intent to better the life of African Americans through knowledge, sought to maintain the notion that Whites were the superior race.<sup>2</sup> The contents of these textbooks held deeply implicit messages that African American education is of no value unless it is committed to perpetuating the racial subordination of Black people.

Furthermore, Reconstruction in America proved to be a double-edged sword that not only allowed, for a short time, Black education to flourish, despite questionable pedagogical curricula, but it allowed a myriad of other crippling factors such as segregation, racism, and poverty to fester and flourish. It was a time when the practices of racism were at their most barbaric.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge, to the freedman, was the key to power and true freedom, and White Southerners knew that fact all too well. Now devoid of the power to use the law in their favor to stop Blacks from attending school, White Southerners resorted to violent measures in the form of terrorism aimed at Black intellectuals who sought to emancipate themselves through education.<sup>9</sup> The message in these acts of terror was clear to all involved (teachers, both Black and White, and students, young and old): cease and desist, lest you suffer a fate far worse than the bondage of slavery.

Under Reconstruction, southern states were governed heavily by the North, where officials tried to prohibit discrimination. The end of Reconstruction ushered in the return of White rule in the South. Given their newly loosened leash, southern states reverted to their old ways with a vengeance. Through acts of terrorism, Southerners soon crippled the dream of Blacks and maintained White supremacy. With the law back in their hands, southern lawmakers began to craft means that assured greater success to White schools at the expense of Black ones, where White schools received funding thirty times more per child whereas Black schools received less than a quarter of those appropriations.<sup>9</sup>

One-hundred and fifty years have passed since the end of the Civil War, a time during which many lives were lost due to the immoral acts of slavery. Even before the Civil war, some in the African American community valued education as they dared to try to learn to read and write, notwithstanding the price they would pay if they were caught. Since then the education of Blacks has become so diluted and devalued through means of terrorism and legislature from the past that it is perhaps one reason why African American children are at a disproportionately high risk of educational failure as educational equity remains elusive today in the form of subtle manifestations such as inadequate instructional facilities, scant resources, and an unequal distribution of funding.<sup>10</sup>

### **What moved African American males away from education**

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, several steps were taken to establish adequate schools for African Americans. At

that time, no former slave did not take the opportunity to educate himself and his children; however, as time progressed the quality of education became even more diluted. A large part of the problem was due to redlining, a once-common discriminatory practice by which banks, insurance companies, and other institution drew a red line on a map within specific geographic areas, specifically inner-city neighborhoods, where they deemed there was risk and thus would not invest.<sup>11</sup> This occurred in both southern and northern areas. Stigmatized and denied access to adequate resources, redlined communities, mainly populated by African-Americans and other people of color, often became places devoid of opportunities, and thus could not retain a thriving middle class.<sup>11</sup>

The permanence of structural racism has ostracized the Black child in education.<sup>12</sup> Educational redlining, where disadvantaged students living in inner-city regions, are subject to the rules and boundaries of their school districts that dictate the schools to which they are assigned, has also contributed to limited access to quality education. Correlative to this is the fact that public schools, funded by property taxes, receive more funding in areas where children live in homes owned by their parents than in districts where children's parents do not.<sup>13</sup> The issue is further exacerbated by a lack of investment in the form of unequally distributed funds and quality teachers who receive, on average, \$2,500 less in inner-city schools than those who work in highly advantaged schools.<sup>11</sup> Despite a free education and the opportunity to obtain one, a lack of resources leads to the depletion of quality education, which unfortunately for most African Americans living in low socioeconomic neighborhoods cannot escape or defy the issue of their zip code.

Education to a child living in poverty is an abstract idea, not seen as reality.<sup>14</sup> The idea that one must wait several decades before the possibility of making high living wages is not something that is tangible and is not a driving force for these children. Further, perceptions of linking Black masculinity to failure and underperformance in the context of school academic achievement reinforces failure from the beginning with little hope of success.<sup>12</sup>

Children living in poverty have been dealt a bad hand, through no fault of their own, and may not know where to begin to rectify their own situations. What they can attest to, however, is their current situations—where they are and what they must do to survive. Consider the following bleak and discouraging statistics about African American children. Thirty-three percent of them live in poverty,<sup>15</sup> 22.5% live in households described as food insecure,<sup>16</sup> 38% live in households where parents lack stable employment, 66% live in single-parent households,<sup>17</sup> more than 75% of Black children born between 1985 and 2000 grew up in high disadvantage neighborhoods,<sup>18</sup> and nationally the graduation rate for Black teens teeters just under 60%.<sup>19</sup> In situations like these, it is no wonder why Black children, particularly the Black male, who is poor, hungry, and often bears familial responsibilities, drifts away from education.

Children live up or down according to their parents' and society's expectations. If implicit and explicit messages are sent that in the end Black boys will not amount to much, that prophecy will more likely be fulfilled. Following the path already laid in front of them, Black males, without a quality education, are sentenced to social and economic death.<sup>18</sup> To compound this further, these young males' Black female counterparts are encouraged more than they are in academic settings.<sup>20</sup>

## The strong educated independent black woman

The gender gap in education is not a new phenomenon; however, across races it has closed and then reversed since the 1950's. More and more women are becoming educated. Buchmann and Diprete<sup>21</sup> detailed this phenomenon as a culmination of several different factors. They postulate that women began to see higher returns as they attained higher levels of education. Their probability of getting married and staying married increased, as did the probability of having a high standard of living and having a low chance of poverty. Throughout the years, rights for women increased including education. The Women's Rights movement led to more opportunities for women in the workplace, thus increasing their need for education. When considering the surge in college completion rates for women in recent years, Buchmann and Diprete<sup>21</sup> suggest that this increase in female college completion could be a result of the increased uncertainty in college returns for men and the increase in gains for women. An educated man, especially a Black man, began to find himself unable to attain high-status or well-paying positions and found that investing in a college education may not yield as much as entering the workforce directly or becoming an entrepreneur.

In 2011, McDaniel, Diprete, Buchmann, & Shwed looked at the gender gap through the lens of race and other barriers to education. They noted that in the wake of slavery, it was more socially acceptable and common for a Black woman to work than for a White woman, regardless of education level. However, as the need for income in the Black household increased, so did the need for the Black woman to further her education and get a better paying job. Also contributing to the rise of educated Black women were the advances in women's and civil rights and the advent of more social acceptance of integration in schools.

It should be noted that the gender gap has remained the same since the 1940's for Black men and women, with women historically having a higher education completion rate than men. Black men benefited from the GI bill, which had provision in it for education, but they still maintained lower completion rates when compared to other gender and racial groups due to the lack of educational resources and funding afforded to Black institutions.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Black men with college degrees were still more likely to be unemployed or underemployed when compared to their White counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Black men with higher education began to be shut out of high-paying jobs by White men and faced greater effects of racism, which discouraged education.<sup>21</sup> Conversely, women of both races had greater access to jobs as teachers and eventually as nurses and in positions of management, which encouraged them to get education.<sup>22</sup>

It seems though that the advent of Black women's education has been at the expense of the Black man. Racial discrimination has hit them much harder, especially in the workforce, and in school. Primary and secondary education systems tend to favor young Black women over Black men.<sup>20</sup> Teachers seem quicker to see behavioral problems in male students, particularly young male Black students, and can be quicker to academically punish them, which highlights a gender and racial discrimination component.<sup>23</sup> These students are then placed into classes with a behavioral regulation component or stigma, where their learning becomes secondary to them behaving normally.<sup>24,25</sup> Their academic achievement lowers, and they become lumped into the statistics that contribute to perpetuating more of these programs which subsequently need more funding to address these fictitious behavioral problems that discriminating teachers see.<sup>24,26</sup> Children seek to meet

the expectations set out for them, and teachers' expectations of young Black men are low and continue to be lowered by this discrimination.

Due to whatever circumstance, young Black women have had a female role model in the home. Usually, it is the mother but may be another family member or distant relation. This woman either encourages them or models pro-education behavior for the young Black women (Davis & Otto, 2016). The increase in single-Black mothers means that most young Black males do not have a male role model. In some low-income neighborhoods, there may not be a model male or female of pro-educational behavior around at all. This is a reflection of the slave experience where mothers were tasked with taking care of their households in addition to all their other duties, regardless of the father's involvement. Slave marriages were not legally recognized and often not even locally honored, and the father could have been sold to another plantation.

## Too cool for school? or school not cool?

Before asking why African American young men are not pursuing high performance professions and higher education, consider the mind of a young Black man today. He is the sum of his influences and his internalization of them. As with most things, it begins with the parents. If the parents are not educated or were not high performing students, the young Black male may already be at a disadvantage.<sup>23</sup> Even if the parents were high performing or do value education, if they are not imparting that value and drive onto their son, then he will not internalize that. Discussing education positively, designating homework time, and sitting down to work through problems together are just some of the positive behaviors that parents can perform to strengthen their child's attitude and desire for an education.

Another factor to consider is the influence of other males in a young man's life. As mentioned earlier, female role models are more common in a young Black male's life (Davis & Otto, 2016). Role models who are both close and far play a huge role in shaping the young Black male's attitude toward pursuing education and performing well. Celebrity role models, with their successful careers, often do not cite education as a tool for success even though they may support it.<sup>27</sup> Most celebrities break into their fields through good fortune (a lucky break) or through hard work at their craft. Very few of the most successful celebrities use their degrees, or even have one.<sup>27</sup> When that group is considered and the African American male role models present, the celebrities who influence young men are mainly rappers, actors, and athletes. Rappers don't record lyrics about bachelor's degrees or academic achievement as something positive. Some even go as far as to reject its contribution to African American success, instead pointing out the flaws in the system.<sup>27</sup> Actors don't mention education, other than drama classes, if they even have those. And, professional athletes may or may not have attended a college. Again, while these celebrities may support academic reform and charities, their work product does not reflect this support. Instead, these celebrities' pictures of success send young Black men down a blind path to the glamor and riches of a fleeting career and siphons their emotional connection to educational efforts. Furthermore, these African American celebrities' childhoods can closely mirror many African American boys who are low achieving or feel that they may be "dumb."<sup>27</sup> Many African American celebrities come from impoverished neighborhoods and/or single parent homes. They are walking rags-to-riches stories, written for struggling Black boys by Black men who "made-it" without an education.<sup>27</sup>



As was stated earlier, many African American children live in impoverished neighborhoods. These neighborhoods witness drug abuse, drug sales, and crime. When the closest successful African American male a young Black man can see is the high-school, dropout, coke dealer and all the popularity he has in their social sphere, that young man begins to aim for this type of easy, flashy success. He sees this idol with all the materialistic forms of success, not understanding that while he may be rich, his affluence is a precarious thing. He does not understand that the drug dealer still has low socioeconomic standing in the wider culture. He has the things that the Black male celebrity role models have that the young Black male wants, and he got them through stealing or selling drugs or hustling with no education necessary. Young Black men want this and often can get wrapped up in it, as hustling doesn't have an age or education requirement. It is well known that children are highly susceptible to influences such as these and in the absence of a valued figure that displays positive influence towards school and more traditional forms of success, the young Black male will continue to idolize celebrities of both the national and local variety.<sup>27</sup>

External influences are not limited to the people around the young Black male who display success. Those influences also include the people in the classroom who are in school beside him. Young Black males who achieve or seek to achieve may often be teased or ostracized by their peers.<sup>28</sup> They can be seen as feminine and uncool or acting white, thus emasculating them and accusing them of betraying their race.<sup>20,28</sup> Other students may use these young gentlemen to copy from their work, or, worse, do their homework for them. These side effects of trying to perform well in school can be traumatizing to the Black male student.<sup>28</sup> Socialization is a huge factor to a developing child. As the boy grows up and becomes less dependent on parents, he begins to build his own support system; hoping acceptance from his peers will offer feelings of security.<sup>28</sup> School is a large portion of a child's social sphere. A child spends roughly 180 days a year around classmates, building relationships with them and interacting with them. If being dumb or not doing homework is what keeps friends around them, if the class clown is getting all the attention from females, or the quarterback is getting the adoration from the whole school despite less than stellar grades and motivation, the young Black male will adopt these attitudes. It is not just the matter of peers not supporting students who seek to achieve but also the positive social reinforcement from peers in response to non-achieving behaviors (anti-intellectualism).<sup>24</sup> Even high achieving students may hide and not reach to help their classmates for fear of being ostracized or extorted. Students who follow the herd mentality of scorning schoolwork and the like are socially rewarded with friends, attention, and other forms of social currency, especially in the Black community.

### Ways to build resilience in African American males

Low socioeconomic status has often relegated Black males to underfunded inner-city schools, and for this singular reason there has been growing concern surrounding low academic achievement and the challenges young men of color face. Scholars have pinpointed many areas of concern that contribute to the growing issue of poor academic performance among poor African American boys.<sup>20,24,28</sup> Despite these very real and massive obstacles that impact and sometimes thwart their education, some young men of color persist, defying the odds. To understand these outliers, researchers have explored the concept of resilience, specifically educational resilience, and how it impacts Black males from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Resilience is often defined as the ability to bounce back or recover from difficulties. Bryan<sup>29</sup> identifies educational resilience as the ability of children to succeed academically despite risk factors that make it difficult to achieve success. Building resilience in African American males is a complex problem, as researchers not only have to identify environments that play a key role in the development of resilience in Black males, but also they must help them capitalize on their strengths, in part by teaching them strategies that help them to recognize and respond to challenges they will inevitably face.<sup>30</sup> Research shows that a significant contribution to resilience in Black males comes from their homes, communities, and schools.<sup>30,31</sup> Consistent with the literature on the role mothers and fathers play in the academic success of their children, parents who set high expectations, provide inspiration and emotional support through effective communication, and monitor their children's activities are more likely to curtail negative behaviors and aspirations than their peers who do not offer familial support in the same ways.<sup>30</sup>

Supplemental to the roles that families play in building resilience are their local communities. This is especially important for young men of color who live with single parents and lack positive male role models, since the presence of a father or father figure is critical and contributes to emotional stability.<sup>17</sup> Through various community interventions and outreach programs that provide mentorship and after school services, young boys can be paired with a respected and valued community member. Through these bonds, Black boys see first-hand the roles and responsibilities of men within their community as well as what being a Black man in American can be, despite what is portrayed in the media.<sup>30</sup>

An extension of the community, schools also play a big role in building resilience. African American boys spend a great deal of their day in school. Oscar Barbarin III, a Tulane University professor of psychology, who organized and co-leads a multi-university initiative, the Boys of Color Collaborative, that gathers and analyzes data on these boys' development, posits a strong alternative. Good classroom structure, paired with supportive teachers and better intervention strategies to foster pro-social outcomes can help change the trajectory of African American male students for the better.<sup>30</sup>

Under the umbrella of the three environments (home, community, and school) that help foster resilience, Williams & Bryan<sup>31</sup> noted ten common factors. These include school-related parenting practices, positive mother-child relationships, personal stories of hardship, extended family networks, supportive school-based relationships, school-oriented peer culture, good teaching, extracurricular school activities, social support networks, and out-of-school time activities. It is crucial that educational legislatures understand the impact that the home, community, and school have on African American male academic achievement and performance. Once these factors of resilience are implemented as educational interventions, they will help rewrite the narrative of the Black male as failures in school.<sup>32-36</sup>

### Conclusion and areas of future study

While it is clear there has been a significant decline in pursuit of higher education, completion of academic goals, and even desire to attain high-level positions among African American males, ways to remedy it are complex and require further research in order to provide tools for parents, schools, and communities to encourage and foster educational resilience among this population. Some research has

been conducted on a few of the factors that contribute to this decline. Research exists on the gender gap in general, as well as some of the factors contributing to the decline of education in African Americans and the attitude of the African American male towards school. However, research has not been definitive enough, nor targeted enough.

In particular, qualitative research on the gender gap across and between races has been lacking and what has been done has been virtually culturally neutral. Surveys outlining the why and how for those who completed, did not complete, or did not enroll in secondary education would be helpful in targeting the issue of increasing enrollment among Black men, thereby closing the gender gap. This information would be especially helpful in determining ways to target Black men 40 years of age and younger to increase the value, accessibility, and completion of secondary and post-secondary education.

Furthermore, research on redlining policies and the decline of political contributions to impoverished neighborhoods and Black education would be helpful in reversing some of the more detrimental effects historical racism has had on education among majority and minority students. This could result in better local legislation and community activism to support education and industry in communities of color.

Assessing attitudes on integration in the educational system and primary and/or other educators' perceptions of the young Black male student could also be an area of future research, hopefully leading to the implementation of specific intervention models and training to equip educators to better deal with students of all genders and races, thus reducing the amount of incorrect labeling of behavioral problems or educational deficits assigned to young Black men.

All of these areas of research will significantly help young Black males navigate primary, secondary, and higher educational opportunities. Having positive, successful Black male role models will also help mitigate the apparent socio-cultural influences of negative Black male role models these young students see in their communities.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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