

RECOGNIZING THE ACADEMIC TALENTS OF YOUNG BLACK MALES:

A COUNTER-STORY

SABRINA N. ROSS
& ALMA STEVENSON
GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Majoritarian stories perpetuate deficit perspectives about people of color that support racism and educational inequity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Using theory and methods of critical race counter-storytelling (Baszile, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), this article challenges majoritarian educational stories about Black male learners by highlighting examples of Black male academic talent demonstrated during a four-week summer literacy program focusing on culturally relevant curriculum for Black youth. This article illuminates examples of academic talent that were observed in the midst of Black male behavior that is typically categorized as “bad” or unruly. By providing alternative readings of these behaviors and the academic talents of critical thinking, creativity, symbolic thinking, and the linguistic complexity they reveal, our purpose is to call attention to examples of Black male academic talent that are too often rendered invisible when assumptions about these learners are made based on majoritarian stories.

Keywords: Black males, counter-storytelling, academic talent, critical race theory, qualitative research

RECOGNIZING THE ACADEMIC TALENTS OF YOUNG BLACK MALES: A COUNTER-STORY

Majoritarian stories are narratives about race and other socially constructed markers of identity that are told from the point of view of dominant groups; though purportedly neutral, majoritarian stories perpetuate deficit perspectives about people of color that support racism and educational inequity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). One significant outcome of the perpetuation of majoritarian stories is an “epistemological colonization” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 40) that delegitimizes knowledge produced by marginalized groups and renders their experiences as deficiencies (Kincheloe, 2008; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

In the U.S. educational context, majoritarian stories present Black male learners as “bad boys” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 19) who are underachievers and academic failures bound for prison (Alexander, 2010; Howard, 2008). By privileging research on negative aspects of Black male educational experiences such as the disproportionate placement of Black male students in special education (Finkel, 2010), the over-representation of Black males in school suspensions and expulsions (Lewis, Bonner, Butler, & Joubert, 2010), and the significantly lower standardized test scores of Black males in comparison to other student groups (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009, 2015; Vannerman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009), majoritarian stories direct focus toward educational interventions devoted to fixing the disciplinary and academic “problems” of Black male students rather than altering the educational policies and practices that prevent Black male learners from achieving their fullest educational potential (Howard, 2008).

Power influences knowledge construction through the shaping of what is considered to be truth or reality (Baszile, 2015; Foucault, 1995). Thus, both the construction of majoritarian stories about Black male learners and the development of counter-stories that challenge deficit perspectives about Black male students and other marginalized groups are intimately connected with issues of power (Collins, 2000; Kincheloe, 2008). Majoritarian stories that present Black male

students as disciplinary problems and academic underachievers are disempowering because they conceal the academic talents Black male learners possess. Additionally, these stories are sources of ideological oppression for Black male students because they provide seeming justification for inequitable educational outcomes (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and other negative outcomes such as the school to prison pipeline (Alexander, 2010; Howard, 2008). The negative influence that majoritarian stories have on perceptions about Black male learners and on the educational policies designed to help these students suggests that countering these majoritarian stories is an important social justice project.

PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

This article challenges majoritarian educational stories about Black male learners by highlighting examples of Black male academic talent demonstrated during a four-week summer literacy program focusing on culturally relevant curriculum for Black youth. The literacy skills of students enrolled in the summer program are discussed in detail elsewhere (Stevenson & Ross, 2015). This article seeks to illuminate specific examples of academic talent observed during the program in the midst of Black male behavior that is typically categorized as “bad” or unruly. By providing alternative readings of these behaviors and the academic talents of critical thinking, creativity, symbolic thinking, and the linguistic complexity they reveal, our purpose is to call attention to examples of Black male academic talent that are too often rendered invisible when assumptions about these learners are made based on majoritarian stories.

We view our alternative reading of the behaviors of Black male youth who enrolled in our summer literacy program as a counter-story that challenges prevailing majoritarian tales of Black male academic failure. We situate our counter-story of Black male academic talent by first reviewing scholarship that challenges majoritarian assumptions about Black male behavior and abilities. We then discuss the theoretical framework of critical race theory, the methodology of critical race counter-storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), and the social positionalities and cultural commitments that inform our work.

Next, we introduce the setting, the curricula, and the participants in the summer literacy program and their behaviors and interactions that represent the phenomena of interest for our counter-story. The actual counter-story consists of four instances of Black male “misbehavior” that are also indicative of academic talent. A discussion of the curricular implications of our findings concludes this article.

LITERATURE REVIEW: COUNTER-STORIES OF BLACK MALE ACADEMIC TALENT

Although not always referred to as counter-stories, there is a small but growing amount of scholarship developed to challenge majoritarian stories about the academic failure and misbehavior of Black male youth. These stories can be understood as a form of “talking back” (hooks, 1989) to the negative and often educationally injurious representations of Black male students. Ann Ferguson’s *Bad Boys* (2001) is an exemplary study in the deleterious effects that tracking, segregated schooling, and labels such as “unsalvageable” (p. 9) and “being on the fast track to prison” (p. 227) have on Black male youth. For three years, Ferguson’s ethnographic study followed two groups of Black male fifth and sixth graders enrolled in a predominantly Black elementary school on the West Coast of the United States: Troublemakers, whose school discipline records and interactions with school personnel reflected persistent educational problems; and Schoolboys, who Ferguson initially perceived as binary opposites of the Troublemakers. Interviews, observations, and interactions with these young Black males revealed the keen intelligence, creativity, and critical literacy of both those labeled as Schoolboys and Troublemakers. Also revealed were the institutionalized policies and administrative and faculty disciplinary practices that led to Troublemakers being treated as criminalized adults. While not termed as such, *Bad Boys* is a counter-story that reveals ways in which labeling practices do not describe troubled Black male youth as they are but as Black male youth are socially constructed and reinforced to be.

In a phenomenological study focusing on eight Black male middle school students who experienced success in mathematics, Berry (2008) used interviews, observations, and analysis of students' mathematical autobiographies to better understand the experiences of Black male students who gained access to high-level middle school mathematics courses. One of the most significant findings of Berry's study was the negative role that the participants' teachers played as educational gatekeepers who blocked access to the students' placement in gifted classes despite demonstrated academic talent.

Of the five participants who were placed in academically gifted classes, four of them (i.e., 80%) had not been recommended by teachers due to the teachers' perceptions of the participants as immature and as exhibiting behaviors that were deemed inappropriate for advanced and gifted classes. Instead of receiving support from their teachers, the four participants were placed in gifted classes as a result of advocacy and intervention by parents or other caring adults. Berry (2008) serves as an important counter-story to perceptions of Black males as having low academic achievement in mathematics or low interest in education. By illuminating the negative influence that teachers' perceptions of Black male behavior had on students' access to advanced and higher-level mathematics classes, Berry's qualitative study raises important questions about the role that teachers' perceptions of Black male "inappropriate" behavior continues to have on Black male educational outcomes.

While revealing the academic talents of Black male youth, counter-stories by Ferguson (2001) and Berry (2008) also reveal the persistence of negative stereotypes placed on these learners. Similarly, Howard's (2008) qualitative case study of ten Black males who were in middle and high school at the time of the interview explored academically successful Black male students' experiences with perceptions of negative racial stereotypes in school. Five of the ten participants were enrolled in urban, predominantly Black and Latino/a schools, and five were enrolled in predominantly White suburban schools; all of the participants were enrolled in schools within a large metropolitan area of the West Coast of the U. S. Despite the differences in the types of schools they attended, all ten of the

participants interviewed by Howard articulated their awareness of the negative racialized views their teachers and school administrators held of them and of the differential treatment they received as Black males. To combat the negative labeling and differential treatment confronting them as Black males, Howard's participants actively pursued academic success and behaviors considered to be pro-social, such as making Honor Roll and serving on the Student Body Council and in other school leadership positions. The narratives of the participants in Howard's (2008) study serve as valuable counter-stories because they reveal instances of Black male academic success and highlight the active strategies these young men engage in to counter negative racial stereotypes about Black male learners.

Counter-stories of and about Black male learners and their in-school experiences help to shed light on formal and informal curricular processes that conceal the academic talents of Black male students. Because Black males "possess an intellect and a profound wealth of knowledge that is not often transferred into the ways in which knowledge must be exhibited in the classroom" (Wood & Jocius, 2013, p. 663), counter-stories that reveal Black male academic talents in out-of-school contexts are also necessary. Kirkland and Jackson (2009) provide one such counter-story. The authors' ethnographic study illuminates the critical literacy practices of seven 11-to-14-year-old Black male participants in the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) early intervention program for young Black males considered at-risk of school failure in Detroit, Michigan. Although school personnel characterized the participants as "barely literate" (p. 278), Kirkland and Jackson reveal the participants' abilities to deftly manipulate a variety of linguistic and symbolic systems in order to articulate their identities as "Cool Kids." Through their pursuit and communication of coolness, these young Black males engaged in a wide array of critical literacy strategies and practices enabling them to read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), to critique it, and to effectively communicate their identities. Kirkland and Jackson's counter-story of the academic talent young Black males exhibit in their out-of-school experiences helps to dispel the persistent belief that Black males cannot read (Haddix, 2009; Tatum, 2006, 2008).

Love (2013) provides another counter-story of Black male academic talent exhibited outside of the formal school environment. Her ethnographic study explored ways in which three Black male participants between the ages of 13 and 17 enrolled in an afterschool program in Atlanta, Georgia, and engaged in critical thinking and knowledge construction related to rap music and hip-hop culture. Love utilized semi-structured and unstructured individual and group interviews with the participants to gain insight into their perceptions of media images in rap music and the contribution of rap music to their identities and lived experiences. Students were able to decipher stereotypical media representations of Blackness and describe how they resisted those representations. Like the Black males interviewed in Howard's (2008) study, participants in Love's study exhibited "intellectual rigor" (Love, 2013, p. 35) as they expressed awareness of racialized stereotypes about Black males and articulated strategies such as code-switching in the presence of Whites to counter those representations.

Like each of the studies reviewed above, the present study seeks to provide a counter-story of Black male academic talent. This counter-story is a synthesis of our alternative readings of four instances of Black male behavior typically referred to as unruly. Our alternative readings are informed by the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT), our commitment to teaching and engaging research in the interest of students of color and other historically marginalized groups, and our personal experiences as mothers whose children have had to navigate the often difficult and culturally incongruent pathways of American public education. In the following section, we review the tenets of CRT and the theory and methodology of critical race counter-storytelling used to develop our counter-story of Black male academic talent.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND CRITICAL RACE COUNTER-STORYTELLING

CRT is an interdisciplinary field that emerged through the work of scholars of color as a critique of the absence of attention to and theorization about race in the legal system and within the field of

critical legal studies (Crenshaw, 2002; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT scholars examine the ways in which social systems like education, the legal system, and media reproduce and normalize racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The goal of CRT scholarship is social transformation through the empowerment of marginalized groups and the elimination of interconnected structures of oppression (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Smith et al., 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

In developing our counter-story of Black male academic talent, we honored the following regularly cited tenets of CRT: (a) a primary focus on race and racism (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002); (b) an emphasis on the intersectionality of racism and other forms of oppression (Smith et al., 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002); (c) validating and learning from the experiential knowledge of persons of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Matsuda et al., 1993; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002); (d) challenging dominant ideology (Matsuda et al., 1993; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002); and (e) a commitment to social justice (Matsuda et al., 1993; Smith et al., 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

FOCUS ON RACE AND RACISM WHILE ATTENDING TO INTERSECTIONALITY

Racism is an endemic and potentially permanent feature of U.S. society (Bell, 1992). Yet even as practices of racism have become more pernicious, they have also become more subtle and difficult to identify (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Work such as ours that attends to the ways that race influences the perceived educational potential of Black males contests explanations of educational inequity that blame Black males for their own plight (Howard, 2008). At the same time, it is insufficient to focus only on issues of race for Black male learners. Racism and gender oppression intersect (Collins, 2000) to create negative educational stereotypes that are unique to Black males. Thus, our specific focus on countering negative academic perceptions of Black males recognizes the need to attend to issues of both race and gender that influence the academic experiences of Black male youth.

CHALLENGING DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AND A COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

Counter-storytelling is an integral feature of CRT educational research (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004); it challenges master narratives of race and other intersectional markers of identity that promote stereotypical and deficit-oriented representations of people of color (Delgado, 1989). By utilizing a critical race methodology of counter-storytelling, this inquiry challenges dominant research traditions that fail to honor the agency and complexity of the experiences of people of color. By shining a light on the creativity, criticality, and drive of Black males within out-of-school spaces, we are at the same time challenging dominant ideologies of Black males as ineducable (Ferguson, 2001). Attending to the informal educational spaces within which Black male youth demonstrate academic talent also holds transformative potential because the knowledge gained can guide formal schooling policies and practices in ways that enhance the educational experiences of Black males.

EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE OF PERSONS OF COLOR

CRT emphasizes the importance of utilizing cultural and racial frames of reference to guide the research process from conceptualization and implementation to data analysis and interpretation (Howard, 2008). Through the use of these frames of reference, critical race counter-stories can be constructed to illuminate a phenomenon of interest in ways that maintain the primacy of race and racism while also honoring the voices and experiences of marginalized groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Our counter-story of Black male academic talent is the culmination of four alternative readings of the Black male behavior discussed in this article. These alternative readings build upon our culturally derived knowledge as women of color, our profound respect for the dignity and agency of historically marginalized groups, and our rejection of research methods that are disconnected from the people and communities whose experiences they seek to capture (Dillard, 2000). In this way, our alternative readings and the resulting counter-story are representative of “research as responsibility” (Dillard, 2000, p. 663).

The alternative readings that follow utilize primary and secondary resources that we interpret through our cultural frames of reference (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The primary resources include small and large group discussions and interviews, student work products, and researcher observations obtained during the summer literacy program. Secondary resources include the researchers' curriculum plans, field notes, personal journals, and conversations related to the students and the program. The behaviors and interactions of the Black males who participated in our summer literacy program will be examined through intersecting lenses of race, gender, and culture (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) to identify meaningful and compelling aspects of Black male academic talent.

SETTING, CURRICULA, AND PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the summer literacy program attended the local chapter of a national service organization in the Southeastern U.S. that provides programs to youth when school is not in session. The literacy program was held in June and July during the summer of 2012 and was conducted three days each week for three hours each day. The literacy program was based on three principles of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP): commitment to students' academic success, development and/or maintenance of students' cultural competence, and development of students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). It included a broad range of culturally congruent (Gay, 2013) literary and audio-visual texts and activities related to content areas of science and social studies. A total of eleven Black elementary school students (nine males and two females) participated in the summer literacy program. This study focuses on interpretations of behaviors exhibited by the nine Black male participants. All were rising second and third graders. As part of the daily routine, students were engaged in literacy activities using their reading, writing, critical thinking, and oral skills. Throughout the program, the researchers had one-on-one conferences with students during which students read an appropriate grade level text to determine their reading fluency and comprehension. Student work products including writing activities, discussion, and creative assignments such as illustrations, rap or poetry, and a collage provided evidence of their orality, writing ability,

creativity, critical thinking, and need for redirection. Through the researchers' evaluation of student reading and work products and their observations of student behavior during one-on-one conferences, small group activities, and large groups discussions, skill levels were identified for each student. The skill levels identified for each Black male participant are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Observed Skills of Participants (N = 9)

Name (Pseudonym)	Grade	Orality	Reading	Writing	Creativity	Critical Thinking	Need for Redirection
Daniel	1	H	M	M	H	H	H
Kamal	2	H	H	H	M	H	H
James	2	M	M	M	M	M	L
Malcolm	2	M	M	M	M	M	L
Randall	2	H	H	H	M	H	H
Wayne	2	H	M	M	H	H	H
Joshua	2	H	H	H	H	H	L
Marcus	2	M	L	L	M	L	H
Deondre	2	H	M	M	H	H	H

L (Low) = skill or behavior was not observed or was observed infrequently; M (Moderate) = skill or behavior was observed to a moderate degree; H (High) = skill or behavior was observed frequently.

CONSTRUCTING THE COUNTER-STORY: EXAMPLES OF BLACK MALE ACADEMIC TALENT IN THE MIDST OF "MISBEHAVIOR"

Below, we present four instances of "misbehavior" by Black male participants in the literacy program (i.e., participation in an activity related to hip-hop culture referred to as the Cypher, participation in a group discussion about slavery, off-task behavior observed during a small group discussion, and off-task behavior observed during an individual work assignment) in order to highlight the academic talents that are also revealed in these activities.

THE CYPHER (LINGUISTIC SKILLS, SELF-REGULATION, IMPROVISATION, AND DRIVE)

Hip-hop culture has a ubiquitous presence within minoritized spaces; many Black youth who live and interact within these spaces have little choice in embracing a hip-hop identity (Emdin, 2013). Most of the Black males in our summer program revealed their identification with hip-hop culture through drawings of themselves in hip-hop gear and through constant rapping, both individually and in groups where they would form a circle and take turns attempting to out-rap one another through a practice referred to as a cypher (Emdin, 2013; Kirkland, 2013). For those unfamiliar with the energy and expressive body language of Black male youth referred to as *verve* (Boykin, 1983) or their sometimes loud outbursts, participation in the cypher could seem like unruly or disruptive behavior. However, cyphers are rule-governed, and Black males who participate in them must demonstrate self-regulation and cooperation (Emdin, 2013).

Scholars have documented the myriad ways in which youth of color evince intellectual skills and knowledge construction (Jenkins, 2013) through their engagement with rap and hip-hop culture. Examples of academic talent manifested through participation in rap include mastery of styles of speech and writing conventions (Jenkins, 2011), complex thinking through the use of analogies and metaphors (Emdin, 2013), and an ability to communicate understandings of the world and aspirations (Kirkland, 2013). Black males in our summer program participated in cyphers every chance that they could. For example, after reading *The Gum-Chewing Rattler* by Joe Hayes (2006), students in the summer literacy program were asked to develop poetic responses and to present their work through rap. During their presentation, the boys formed a cypher, demonstrating their linguistic fluency by rapping their responses to the book. Additionally, they demonstrated self-regulation and cooperation (Emdin, 2013) by tacitly organizing themselves and taking turns as they rapped. For some of these students, participation in the cyphers revealed academic talents that activities such as reading books and traditional writing activities did not. Some students who seemed to struggle when asked to engage in conventional reading and writing activities demonstrated linguistic

fluency and a commitment to excellence (Jenkins, 2013) as they attempted to write and deliver the best raps that they could in the summer literacy program.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION (CRITICAL AWARENESS AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE)

During the summer literacy program, we introduced students to a number of literary and audio-visual texts that conveyed efforts by Blacks to resist racial oppression. One of the texts was *Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Jeannette Winter (1992), which portrays a group of slaves escaping a plantation via the Underground Railroad. An image in that text with the words “Negroes for Sale” prompted strong emotions from some of the students who had never heard of the word “Negroes” before. We held an unplanned large group discussion to provide students with the space to express concerns and questions about the word “Negroes” and other information they learned about in our program. The following excerpts from that discussion exemplify the students’ critical awareness and ability to engage in social critique. The discussion began when one of the researchers asked, “When you were reading the book *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, some of you were talking about the picture that showed “Negroes for Sale.” . . . Do you have questions about that word “Negroes” that was used?”

Kamal: No.

Researcher 1: Did you have questions about why some people tried to sell other people during slavery?

Kamal: Because they are evil.

Researcher 1: Do you want to talk about the word “Negroes”?

Kamal: No.

James: I do.

[Numerous students laugh.]

Researcher 1: Go ahead James. . . . You want to know why or why they used that word?

[James nods his head.]

Researcher 1: . . . well “Negroes” is a word we don’t use anymore.
That was a word that

they used to describe Black people . . .

Deondre: [interrupting] ooh! What was that word? “Negroes”?

[Several students are laughing.]

Kamal: What was the word for White people? [Students begin laughing again] . . . White Cracker . . . ?

[Students laugh louder.]

Attempts to discuss the word “Negroes” seemed to prompt a strong avoidance response in Kamal. One interpretation for Kamal’s response was that he was reluctant to discuss negative emotions surrounding the word “Negroes” and the topic of slavery in general. This interpretation is consistent with literature documenting the hegemonic masculine identities adopted by many Black male youth that discourage displays of sadness or other emotions deemed effeminate (e.g., Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Kamal’s reluctance could also be interpreted as a higher level of awareness of the negative connotations of the word “Negroes”; in this sense, Kamal’s use of the seemingly comparable pejorative racial term *White Cracker* could indicate his mockery of and protest against the topic and his awareness of the similarity and connection between the word “Negroes” and the “most socially consequential racial insult” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 25), the N-word, that Black people continue to be subjected to.

The researcher’s efforts to redirect the conversation were met with additional challenges because some of the students wanted to continue the line of questing that Kamal started:

Marcus: What is the . . . what is the word for White people?

[Students talking over each other, making a portion of the recording inaudible.]

Researcher 1: It’s a bad word . . .

Kamal: White Cracker.

Randall: You don’t say it at home or anywhere else.

[Unclear from the recording which male student repeats the word.]: White Crackers.

[Students talking over each other.]

Marcus: Is it a curse word when they use it for White people?

Researcher 1: It's not a curse word, but it's not a nice word. It's a bad . . . it's a mean word . . . back in history, Black people were treated very badly . . .

Daniel: Like . . . like little . . . like little animals.

[Discussion continues with students excitedly talking over one another.]

The male students' successful shifting of the focus of conversation can be understood as a correction of what they perceived as an initial imbalance in the conversation. Both *Follow the Drinking Gourd* and the researcher's opening question during the discussion focused solely on derogatory names assigned to Blacks. Kamal's refusal to discuss the word "Negroes" and his repeated usage of the word White Cracker seem to reveal a critical awareness of inequities in the instructional discourse and larger social context. His actions also seem to reflect a desire to balance the conversation through the interjection of a negative word used to describe Whites. The social critique implicit in Kamal's comments was also observed in the comments of other male students participating in the conversation. This social critique is evident in the final portion of the excerpt:

Researcher 1: There are bad words that you can call Black people and that you can call White people . . .

Daniel: [interrupting] But children can't say them because they might get suspended.

Researcher 1: No one should say them because they are bad words.

Randall: They used to call us . . . It's not a bad word, but it's just . . . they called us monkeys and [inaudible].

Researcher 2: Who told you that?

Randall: I saw it on TV.

[Many of the students begin laughing.]

Kamal: . . . and crackheads [Researchers look at Kamal with surprise] . . . people who smoke crack.

This large group discussion took an unexpected turn when Randall complicated the researcher's statement that words such as White Cracker should not be repeated because they are "bad" words. Randall's statement that "they called us monkeys" suggests that a more complicated understanding of bad words might be needed. Inspired by Randall's comment, Kamal's final statement demonstrates his awareness of the contemporary negative stereotypes of Black people as "crackheads."

The large group discussion presented above contained numerous examples of what many teachers would describe as unruly behavior by Black male students including early refusal to engage in the topic, shifting of the topic, use of slurs, frequent interruptions, loud laughter, and simultaneous speech; however, we view nearly all of these elements as indicating deep engagement with the content. The enthusiastic participation of these male students in the group discussion, though animated at times and including inappropriate language, revealed the skill of these rising second and third grade males in directing the conversation towards topics they were interested in. It also demonstrated their abilities to successfully interpret and critique the social context of our conversation. Through the large group discussion, the male students took control of the space we opened for them and revealed a keen understanding of how boys and men like them are represented and positioned by society. At their young age, these Black males were already manifesting elements of emergent conscientization (Stevenson & Beck, 2017) by asserting their critiques of society's injustices and calling for change.

OFF-TASK BEHAVIOR (PERSPECTIVE-TAKING, LINGUISTIC COMPLEXITY, AND SYMBOLIC THINKING)

In this section, we provide two examples of Black male academic talent demonstrated through off-task behaviors. The first example was observed during a small group discussion of enslaved Blacks and their

use of the Underground Railroad. The discussion shifted to punishment inflicted on Blacks who were caught trying to escape enslavement when James began talking about people he knew and their dealings with police. As the researcher attempted to redirect the conversation back to the Underground Railroad, Daniel interjected the phrase “don’t snitch” into the conversation. Surprised by this rising second grader’s use of the term “snitch,” and unsure if he understood the meaning of the term, the researcher asked Daniel what the word “snitch” meant. The following excerpt is taken from that conversation:

Daniel: It means that you tell too much.

James: I don’t.

Daniel: Well I tell a little bit, but I don’t tell all the time.

James: I don’t neither.

Daniel: He only . . . but when I hurt him, he only tell [*sic*] when I hurt him.

James: One time, he punched me on my arm and it hurt.

Daniel: But one time I did like this. [Daniel makes a gesture of pulling something down.]

I didn’t know I was actually gone [*sic*] do it. I thought you were hanging on to the bleachers. That’s all I thought.

James: You grabbed my hand!

Daniel: I hurt your knee?

James: Yeah!

Daniel: Dang . . . I ain’t know that. Sorry.

Both Daniel and James seemed to place value on withholding information from authority figures when such information could cause trouble for others. The “don’t snitch” phenomenon discussed in the excerpt above by Daniel and James is an aspect of the Black community that has been documented in research literature (e.g., Clampet-Lundquist, Carr, & Kefalas, 2015; Morris, 2010). Of significance here, however, is Daniel’s nuanced understanding of “snitching.” Specifically, Daniel indicated that it was acceptable for James to “snitch” because James was hurt by Daniel’s actions. This

nanced understanding is an indication of Daniels' critical thinking skills. In listening to James discuss the knee injury he received after being pulled from the bleachers, Daniel realizes that he not only hurt James's hand but also his knee. The surprise he registers in the excerpt and his subsequent apology provide evidence of Daniel's listening skills, his ability to engage in perspective-taking, and his genuine remorse for hurting James. That these skills were demonstrated during an off-task conversation about "snitching" underscores the importance of carefully attending to the off-task behavior of young Black males.

A final example of Black male academic talent was observed when the students were participating in a social studies activity regarding the Civil War. We discussed Black activists during slavery, and the students viewed an animated documentary about Harriet Tubman and her efforts to help escaped slaves. The students were asked to create artistic responses to the content of the documentary. Earlier that morning, Wayne and Daniel had been quarreling and were separated; one of us engaged Wayne in one-on-one work to redirect his attention away from the conflict with Daniel while the other worked with the rest of the group. While Wayne was successfully working, Daniel began taunting him by walking nearby and making faces. The researcher working with Wayne was unaware of the taunts until Wayne complained that Daniel kept bothering him. The researcher looked up to see Daniel taunting Wayne by slowly singing the word "freedom" over and over again while smiling in Wayne's direction. As soon as Daniel realized that the researcher was watching him, he stopped singing and appeared to concentrate intently on his assignment. With the researcher's attention now focused on Daniel, Wayne balled his hand into a fist, raised it in the air, and nodded his head, saying, "Freedom . . . I'll give you freedom." Wayne then turned back to the researcher with a smirk on his face and resumed work on his assignment.

The exchange revealed a complexity of language comprehension and creativity by both students. Daniel's singing of the word "freedom" served two purposes. At first glance, it seemed to demonstrate that he was on task. Daniel's singing of the word "freedom" seemed to be behavior that was compatible with his artistic

expression assignment. However, the word “freedom,” when sung in a taunting manner to Wayne, was a form of teasing that emphasized Daniel’s freedom to work individually while Wayne was required to work with the researcher. The cleverness of Daniel’s taunt illustrates both an understanding of language and an ability to use it strategically. Similarly, Wayne’s raised fist and retort that he would give Daniel freedom was also clever and strategic. His fighting gesture was a threat to Daniel and a demonstration of one-upmanship, made all the more effective because it was performed while the researcher was at his side. Wayne’s certainty that he had conveyed his multi-layered meaning to Daniel was evidenced by the pleased look on his face when he smirked at the researcher before returning to his assignment.

DISCUSSION

By illuminating academic talents exhibited by Black males in the midst of supposedly “bad” behavior, the purpose of this study was to trouble persistent negative perceptions of Black males and their lack of academic achievement. The demonstration of various aspects of academic talent by Black males in our summer literacy program raises important questions about the role that perception plays in both the “bad” behavior of Black males and their supposed underachievement. Though they did often require redirection, when viewed through our cultural frames of reference, these male students exhibited a range of academic talents that are needed for school and career success, including self-regulation, cooperation, improvisation, and drive (i.e., the cypher); critical awareness and an ability to engage in social critique (i.e., group discussion); and perspective-taking, linguistic complexity, and symbolic thought (i.e., off-task behaviors). Using critical race counter-storytelling (Baszile, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), our alternative readings of instances of “misbehavior” of Black male learners in our summer program demonstrate that, in contradiction to majoritarian stories about their academic underperformance, Black males have an abundance of academic talent that can guide formal curricula development for these students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FORMAL CURRICULA

Examining the informal educational experiences of Black male learners is important because these experiences provide glimpses of how Black males live and learn (Wood & Jocius, 2013). In illuminating instances of Black male academic talent, we argue for a shift in focus from educational interventions that “fix” Black male learners toward interventions that make formal educational spaces more relevant and responsive to the learning needs of culturally diverse students (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). The cultural ways evidenced by Black males are not deficiencies; they are strengths (Paris, 2012). Developing in-school curricula that build on Black male students’ verve (Boykin, 1983), their cultural engagement with rap (Emdin, 2013), and their keen abilities to critically read and critique their social environments holds promise for making schools into places where Black male students’ many academic talents can shine.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Baszile, D. T. (2015). Rhetorical revolution: Critical race counterstorytelling and the abolition of White democracy. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(3), 239–249.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Berry III, R. Q. (2008). Access to upper-level mathematics: The stories of successful African American middle school boys. *Journal of Research in Mathematics Education*, 39(5), 464–488.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Boykin, A. W. (1983). The academic performance of Afro-American children. In J. Spence (Ed.), *Achievement and achievement motives* (pp. 324–337). San Francisco, CA: Freeman.
- Clampet-Lundquist, S., Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M. (2015). The sliding scale of snitching: A qualitative examination of snitching in three Philadelphia communities. *Sociological Forum*, 30(2), 265–285.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (2002). The first decade: Critical reflections, or “A foot in the closing door.” In F. Valdes & J. McCristal (Eds.), *Crossroads, directions, and a new critical race theory* (pp. 9–31). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- DeCuir, J. T., & Dixson, A. (2004). “So when it comes out, they aren’t that surprised that it is there”: Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 26–31.
- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionalists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87, 2411–2441.

- Dillard, C. (2000). The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(6), 661–681.
- Emdin, C. (2013). Pursuing the pedagogical potential of the pillars of hip-hop through sciencemindedness. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 4(3), 83–99.
- Ferguson, A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Finkel, E. (2010). Black children still left behind. *District Administration*, 46(10), 26–30.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. London, England: Routledge.
- Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 48–70.
- Haddix, M. (2009). Black boys can write: Challenging dominant framings of black adolescent males in literacy research. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(4), 341–343.
- Hayes, J. (2006). *The gum chewing rattler*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Howard, T. C. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of Black males in PreK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 110(5), 954–985.
- Jenkins, T. (2013). De (Re) constructing ideas of genius: Hip-hop, knowledge, and intelligence. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 4(3) 11–23.
- Jenkins, T. S. (2011). A beautiful mind: Black male intellectual identity and hip-hop culture. *Journal of Black Studies*, 42(8), 1231–1251. doi:10.1177/0021934711405050

- Kennedy, R. (2003). *Nigger: The strange career of a troublesome word*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2008). *Knowledge and critical pedagogy: An introduction*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2013). *A search past silence: The literacy of young Black men*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kirkland, D. E., & Jackson, A. (2009). “We real cool”: Toward a theory of black masculine literacies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(3), 278–297.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). Towards a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 159–165.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). But that’s just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 159–165.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68.
- Love, B. (2013). “Oh, they’re sending a bad message”: Black males resisting and challenging Eurocentric notions of Blackness within hip hop and the mass media through critical pedagogy. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 4(3), 24–39.
- Matsuda, M., Lawrence, C. R., Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. W. (1993). *Words that wound*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Morris, E. W. (2010). “Snitches end up in ditches” and other cautionary tales. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 26(3), 254–272.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *The nation’s report card: Reading 2009*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *School composition and the Black-White achievement gap*. Washington, DC: National Assessment for Educational Progress, U.S. Department of Education.

- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3) 93–97.
- Smith, W. A., Yosso, T. J., & Solorzano, D. G. (2007). Racial primes and black misandry on historically white campuses: Toward critical race accountability in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43, 559–585.
- Solorzano, D., & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(23), 22–44.
- Stevenson, A., & Beck, S. (2017). Migrant students’ emergent conscientization through critical, socioculturally responsive literacy pedagogy. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 49(2), 240–272. doi:1086296X16683418
- Stevenson, A., & Ross, S. (2015). Starting young: Emergent Black masculinity and early literacy. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 6(1), 75–90.
- Tatum, A. W. (2006). Engaging Black males in reading. *Educational Leadership*, 63(5), 44–49.
- Tatum, A. W. (2008). Toward a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction: A focus on Black male adolescents and texts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78(1), 155–180.
- Winter, J. (1992). *Follow the drinking gourd*. New York, NY: Dragonfly Books.
- Wood, S., & Jocius, R. (2013). Combating “I hate this stupid book!”: Black males and critical literacy. *Reading Teacher*, 66(8), 661–669. doi:10.1002/trtr.1177

Ardavan Eizadirad is an instructor at Ryerson University in the School of Early Childhood Studies in Faculty of Community Services. He is also a PhD candidate in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at University of Toronto. His PhD thesis is examining the effects of standardized testing on subjective experiences of grade 3 students and parents in the context of Toronto, Canada. His research interests include standardized testing, systems of accountability, community engagement, anti-oppressive practices, critical pedagogy, social justice education, resistance, subversion, and decolonization. His recent publications include “The University as a Neoliberal and Colonizing Institute: A Spatial Case Study Analysis of the Invisible Fence between York University and the Jane and Finch Neighbourhood in the City of Toronto” (March 2017).

Andrew Gitlin’s current work has focused on looking back at some of the most important and influential projects coming out of critical theory, including critical pedagogy, action research, as well as commonsense notions of therapy and learning. These extensions to critical theory bring into play notions of space and the use of progressive technology.

Philippa Hall is an independent writer and researcher whose interests include social policy, legal reform, political economy, and education policy. Several of these research themes have been examined within the context of the history, politics, and implementation of neoliberal policy. She has written a range of magazine articles, book chapters, journal articles, and book reviews. Her current research is on EU law, hate speech, and media culture.

James Ingerski is the director of the Teacher Intern Program at Susquehanna University where he teaches instructional design and technology in education courses and advises nontraditional, postbaccalaureate students seeking state teacher certification.

Michelle M. Murray, MA, is a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program within the Department of Human Development and Family Science. She is a research assistant

and an independent instructor of human sexuality. Her research interests include family communication about sex.

Mary R. Nedela, MS, is a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program within the Department of Human Development and Family Science. Her research interests include mental health and well-being of Bisexual-identified individuals and couples, affirmative therapy practices, and queer discourse.

John P. Portelli is a Professor in the Department of Social Justice Education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. His main interests in research and teaching are philosophy of education and educational leadership and policy. He has published 10 books as well as over 100 articles and chapters. His most recent book is *Key Questions for Educational Leaders* (July 2015, Word and Deed Publishing). He is also a prolific speaker. His keynote addresses, lectures, and workshops include topics such as continuous professional development, quality assurance, and student engagement; democratic education; intercultural education and dialogue; and ethical issues in educational leadership.

Sabrina N. Ross is an Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University. Her scholarship is grounded in critical theoretical approaches with a particular emphasis on Black feminist thought and explores intersections of race, gender, and power within formal and informal educational contexts.

Sarah M. Steelman, MS, is a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program within the Department of Human Development and Family Science. Her recent publications include “Challenges and Strategies of Sexual Minority Youth Research in Southwest Virginia” (2017) and “Most and Least Meaningful Learning Experiences in Marriage and Family Therapy Education” (2016).

Alma D. Stevenson is an Associate Professor of Literacy at Georgia Southern University. Her research explores sociocultural perspectives on literacy, literacy in science, and the role of language and literacy in culture, identity, and academic achievement. She is particularly interested in the role of home languages and cultures as sources

of affective support and positive identity formation in historically underserved minorities. Her research seeks to constructempowering curricula and literacy pedagogies that advocate for educational equity.