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From Problem to Prizewinners: Recalibrating Perspectives on Black Student Achievement

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In the year 2013, media reports and societal tropes dominate the landscape surrounding Black student achievement in the United States. A recent report I authored with Drs. Julian Vasquez Heilig and Su-Jin Jez (2012) looked at the performance of Black students in the states of Texas, California, and New York. Our analyses provided a complicated picture of the Black student experience. For instance, the past decade has seen an increase in Black student performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the statewide exit exam – and though it has narrowed, a gap persists between the outcomes for Black students compared to White students (Vasquez Heilig, Jez, & Reddick, 2012).

Regarding the dropout rate of Black Texas students, the most reliable data come after 2005, when the state was required to use National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) standards to count leavers. The first notable issue is that dropout rates rose between 2005 and 2006 with the new reporting standard, from 5.5% to 13.3%, rising to 17.2% and declining slowly to 11.8% in 2010. Black Texas student dropouts surpassed the overall rate of 7.3%, and left school at nearly triple the rate of White students (3.5%). Similarly, the graduation rate for Black students dipped significantly – by 7.2%, to a nadir of 70.7% in 2007, rising to 78.8% in 2010 (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012).

National comparisons are helpful in charting how Black students have fared academically over the past decade. Looking at the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for Black students, we can see double-digit increases between 2000 and 2009 in both 4th and 8th grade outcomes – with the exception of 8th grade NAEP results in reading, where the increase over the decade is only one percentage point (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012). Higher education-related assessments, namely the ACT and SAT, reveal further interesting data about Black student achievement nationally. There was no increase in composite ACT score among Black students nationally from 2000 to 2009. The data reveal modest gains in SAT scores among Black students from 2000 to 2009 (<10 points). Six-year college graduation rates reveal that in the state of Texas, Black student graduation rates declined slightly between 2002 (32%) and 2010 (31%), while the graduation rate increased over this same period for White students (36% to 40%) (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012).

Both at the state and national level, there is a concern regarding how Black students have fared under the high-stakes testing environment of the past decade. Improvements in national assessments and a narrowing of the gap between Black students and White students must be tempered with the data that show Black student dropout rates are greater than those of White students and graduation rates are declining compared to White students. It is indeed a complex picture. The message is clear that the present educational climate has substantial room for improvement for all students, especially Black students.

America, 2013: A Harrowing Context

The picture painted from national and statewide data on Black student achievement should be tempered in context. What is it like to live in America for Black youth at this moment in time? In 2013, an exact half-century after the historic March on Washington, Black youth have to measure the considerable social and political progress of the Civil Rights Movement with the wrongful death of 17 year old Trayvon Martin whose life came to an end at the hands of an individual acting out of fear and ignorance (Barry, Kovaleski, Robertson, & Alvarez, 2012). This tragedy was further compounded by the acquittal of this self-styled neighborhood watchman, strangely charged with second-degree murder, which made the prosecution's case virtually impossible (Linton, 2013). These youth have to reconcile historical progress with the indignities suffered by a teenaged Rachel Jeanteal at the hands of the media (Bernard, 2013) and the oddly upbeat demeanor of the Florida attorney general, who after losing the prosecution, called a press conference to utter with a smile that "justice has been served" (Didymus, 2013). Black youth also have the example of Oscar Grant III, another young Black male killed "accidentally" by a police officer at the Fruitvale San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rail station (Bongiovi, Whitaker, & Coogler, 2013; Bulwa, Buchanan, & Yi, 2009).

Indeed, Black youth and particularly Black males are far too easily categorized as threats – with a legal system and court of public opinion that seems too eager to rationalize and justify violent action against them. This zeitgeist exists in an educational context in which Black students are subject to racial microaggressions and stereotype threat from the early grades to

graduate settings (Allen, 2010; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Steele, 1997). The Supreme Court of the United States heard a case, *Fisher v. University of Texas,* where a plaintiff argued that she did not gain admission to The University of Texas at Austin because of her race, when all evidence clearly indicated that she simply did not meet the criteria for admission that year. Notably, 168 African American and Latino with *higher* test scores and GPAs than Abigail Fisher were also denied admission in 2008 (Hannah-Jones, 2013). This only resuscitated the damaging – and false – trope of the underqualified affirmative action admit. The highest court in the land further diminished the Voting Rights Act (Liptak, 2013) after which the attorney general of the state of Texas immediately enacted Texas' hotly contest voter ID law, expected to suppress African American and Latino voting (Gillman, 2013).

It is interesting that states with a track record of discriminatory treatment to people of color are afforded a *tabula rasa,* while stereotypes about Black males endure – they have been problematized from the inception of this nation to the present. I would posit that Black students are cognizant of how they are seen in American society – while kindergartners and middle school students may not know the names Trayvon Martin and Emmitt Till, they are all too familiar with the perception of being seen as a threat – and in the words of noted scholar W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), they are intimately familiar with how it feels "to be a problem."

What to Do Next

I am aware that this piece, at this point, conveys a pessimistic view of media, societal, and political realities

confronting Black youth. This imagery, which has some effect on their self-image and self-worth, leads to psychic energy being expended that might be better applied to other efforts, as noted by Steele and others. It is my belief, however, that two strategies can assist educators in telling a more complete picture of Black student achievement. One is telling the complete and accurate story of Black student participation in higher education, and the other is embracing the success stories of Black youth and Black student achievement that are often ignored by the media, and hence inaccessible role models for Black youth.

Getting the Facts Straight: Examining College Enrollment and Incarceration

The adage, "if it bleeds, it leads," is an appropriate perspective on media and societal interpretations of the Black American experience. Negative hyperbole encircles our understanding of Black Americans, and social science. One can trace such a lineage from Moynihan's (1965) flawed assumption that Black families were matrifocal (researchers more accurately define Black families as egalitarian [Willie & Reddick, 2010]) to the decline in two-parent Black households (due to a revised definition from the U.S. Census Bureau, these families were on the increase since 2004 [Roberts, 2008]). An even more pernicious portrayal of Black women as "welfare queens" by then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan in 1976 (Naughton, 1976) should be included in this lineage as well. In these examples, one can see how media commentators and political actors have often promoted flawed analyses and selectively interpreted data to reify inaccurate categorizations about Black

people. One such trope is the canard that there are more Black males in prison than in college.

Howard University psychologist Ivory Toldson (2013) most recently revisited this statistic in an article in *The Root*. Noting that the origin of this "fact" emerged from a 2002 Justice Policy Institute report, Toldson's analysis noted that a number of institutions, including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), did not report Black male enrollments in 2001 to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). However, these data are found in the 2011 Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) dataset (Toldson, 2013). In fact, while the Black male prison population increased slightly from 2000 to 2010 (791,600 to 841,000), the Black male college population rose from around 693,044 in 2000 (with flawed data, missing many HBCUs) to 1,445,194 in 2011. There are certainly causes for concern when one looks beyond the numbers. For example, Toldson noted that the top 10 institutions enrolling Black males in 2011 were comprised of three for-profit institutions (which have come under increasing scrutiny for their low completion rates), four community colleges, and three public four year colleges (as cited in Martin, 2013). None of the top 10 institutions were HBCUs; in 2001, the top 10 consisted of four institutions of this designation (Toldson, 2013). There are a number of questions that are worthy of pursuing given many of these institutions' struggles to graduate Black males students, but they are beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is quite clear that Black males are represented at a higher level in higher education than in prison.

The implications for the continuance of this myth are significant. Like virtually every Black male in America, I am all too familiar with the appellation of being an "endangered species"

– and believing that more Black males are in prison than college certainly fits this negative picture. How many Black males erroneously believe that it is more likely that they will end up in prison than college, and how does that color their own attitudes and beliefs about society, education – and most importantly, themselves? One wonders what the outcome of February 26, 2012 would have been if George Zimmerman knew that the Black male he followed and then shot was more likely to be a future college student than a future felon: as Du Bois (1903) prophetically said, "How does it feel to be a problem?"

Self-fulfilling prophecies and stereotypes absorbed by the individuals charged with shaping their educational future may have as much to do with the deleterious educational outcomes for Black males as inequitable funding. The onus is on the research community and invested observers to carefully digest reports on Black educational attainment and ensure that the facts are indeed accurate – before reifying and confirming well-worn yet inaccurate categorizations about how Black students fare. There are enough alarming statistics on Black student achievement that point to significant structural inequities without creating more.

Moving the Conversation Forward: Studying (and Sharing) Success

Hand in hand with appropriately interpreting the status of Black student achievement is the need for advancing "stories of success" (Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, & Platt, 2011). University of Pennsylvania researcher Shaun Harper (2012) agreed that asset-based discourse is ultimately more productive. He specifically noted that "those who are interested in Black male

student success have much to learn from Black men who have actually been successful" (p. 1).

Fortunately, more scholars now embrace this approach: for example, the *Journal of African American Males in Education* has an upcoming special issue focused on Black males who have successfully navigated educational settings. Strayhorn (2013) examined the significance of grit – "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. . . working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087-1088) – on Black male achievement at a predominantly White institution, and found a positive correlation between grit and GPA. Strayhorn further noted its predictive validity for academic success beyond high school GPA and standardized test scores.

The burgeoning body of work on the positive aspects of Black student success has also found its way into the media as of late: Gabrielle Turnquest, an 18 year old Black woman from Florida, recently became the youngest person to pass the Bar of England (Whitehead, 2013). I would be remiss as a former *Jeopardy!* champion to note that the 2013 Teen Tournament winner was Leonard Cooper, , a 17 year old Black male from Arkansas, whose final answer went viral (Franco, 2013). Rachel Jeantel – previously mentioned as an example of the vilification of Black youth in the media – returned to the media when radio host Tom Joyner pledged to assist Jeantel in finishing high school and attending an HBCU (Bacon, 2013). Aside from his media activities, Joyner heads an eponymously named foundation that has raised $60 million to financially assist HBCU students (Tom Joyner Foundation, 2011). Such prominent examples of high

academic achievement and aspiration are welcome in the sphere of media. Yet, this is not the only option.

Institutions can publicly recognize high academic achievement among Black students, to both amplify the accomplishments of these scholars and refute negative stereotypes about Black students. An example of this is the Portland (Oregon) Public Schools' project "Young, Gifted, and Black," which publicly honors high achieving Black students with a professional photograph and interview with a journalist, displayed on the district's website and in a shopping mall (Melton, 2010; Williams, 2013). The idea originated during a district-wide discussion about racial inequity and potential bias. District family and community support manager Reiko Williams stated:

> We often talk about the achievement gap and deficits when we talk about black youth. The stereotypes are always negative. We wanted to change the conversation and focus on the strengths…. Even within the district, people needed to see and understand that there are examples of successful black youth. We have to face the stereotypes in our own building as well (cited in Melton, 2010).

Conclusion: Lift as We Climb

In this essay I examined many of the troubling aspects about Black student achievement: namely, the gap (both that regarding academic performance and that of consciousness) separating Black students from White students indicating that structural and attitudinal barriers thwart student motivation and ability. Additionally, the articulation of Black youth as a threat

(which some in the media actively feed), in which young Black males in particular are killed at the hands of law enforcement and even nonauthorative self-styled "watchmen," casts a further pall on the totality of the Black student experience in 2013. However, a cadre of researchers and policymakers are accentuating the positive aspects of Black student achievement – and even some media participants are similarly presenting stories of excellence. This of course does not minimize the serious concerns detailed by Harper (2012) and others regarding the significant work required to address the structure impediments to Black student achievement; however, these assets-based research approaches and media concentration on success stories more fully contextualizes the Black student experience, both enlightening and educating students, educators, and the general public about the accomplishments of Black youth – moving Black students from "problems" to "prizewinners."

There is also a challenge to those who have chosen to read this article as well. As producers and consumers of educational research, we must work resolutely to ensure that the work we create and digest reflects a nuanced and accurate picture of Black students and their educational experiences. We need to call to question research that frames Black students, or any demographic of students, as deficient or troubled, when in fact the blame and responsibility lies primarily, if not exclusively, in a structure that persists in penalizing youth for their race, ethnicity, and the absence of the transfer of intergenerational wealth.

Richard J. Reddick's research areas include the experiences of minority and majority faculty in the role of mentors to undergraduate students of color, how faculty negotiate work-life balance with the demands of tenure and promotion in the context of predominantly White research-intensive universities, and the unequal service obligations of faculty of color at predominantly White research-intensive universities. Previously, he worked as an elementary school teacher in inner-city Houston and as a student affairs administrator at MIT, Cal Poly, and Emory. Reddick is the author of over 25 publications, including books, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, and book chapters.

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