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Using a tenet of critical theory to explain the African American male achievement disparity

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African American Male Achievement: Using a Tenet of Critical Theory to Explain the African American Male Achievement Disparity

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Abstract

Although African Americans continue to demonstrate a desire for education, Black male enrollment and completion rates in higher education are dismal when compared to other ethnic groups. Researchers and scholars have noted various theories and philosophies responsible for the academic disengagement of African American men in higher education. This article provides a new contextual lens for understanding the academic disengagement of Black men using a tenet of critical theory as a method to explain the African American male achievement disparity. Additionally, this research offers employable strategies and activities that may encourage Black male achievement.

Keywords

African American men, critical theory, societal influences, academic success

African Americans[1] have a long history of valuing education (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Freeman, 2005; Lee, 2005). Although many state

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laws, especially during the Civil War period, prohibited the education of Blacks, African Americans have traditionally linked their educational pursuits to a sense of liberation and a desire to improve the plight of their people (Perry, 2003). Slaves, such as Frederick Douglass and Denmark Vesey, are good illustrations of these principles. Although they never received a formal education, they exhibited a passion for education and actively sought it as a means to promote empowerment and freedom from the bondage of servitude (Perry, 2003).

After slavery, emancipated Blacks maintained their passion for education. By 1890, one third of Black children were attending schools (White & Cones, 1999). Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were another venue African Americans used to pursue their proclivity for education after the Civil War (Allen et al., 2007). As time progressed, so too did the centrality of education in the lives of African Americans. This is reflected in the writings and teachings of Black historical figures, such as Carter G. Woodson, Malcolm X, and W. E. B. Du Bois. These men demonstrated a missionary zeal for education and urged other African Americans to engage enthusiastically in education (Haley & Malcolm, 1965/1998; Woodson, 1933/2000).

Other Blacks have been receptive to the message these and other historical figures heralded about education. Their receptivity manifested in African Americans supporting organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which focused on employing legal tactics to challenge *de jure* segregation emanating from *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896),* which legalized separate but equal facilities between Whites and Blacks in the United States. As support from African Americans remained unabated, the NAACP's defense team convinced the Supreme Court, in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Kansas* (1954) case, that the doctrine of separate but equal, in the context of education, promoted injustice and inequality. This decision prompted gradual integration of public schools, met by limited governmental intervention and massive resistance from Whites (Patterson, 2001).

Although African Americans continue to demonstrate a desire for education, Black men's enrollment and completion rates in higher education are dismal compared to other groups, most notably Black women (Cross & Slater, 2000; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008). Currently, African American men account for 4.3% of the total enrollment at 4-year higher education institutions in the United States (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008). Notably, college enrollment among Black men is the same as it was in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008). Harvey notes, out of the 73.7% of African American men who graduated from high school in 2000 compared to 79.7% for Black

women, only 33.8% of African American men enrolled in college compared to 43.9% of their female counterparts. Although the current gender gap among men and women seem to be problematic across all racial and ethnic lines, the extent to which this is true is striking among Blacks.

Researchers and scholars have noted various theories and philosophies responsible for the academic disengagement of African American men in higher education. The purpose of the article is to provide a new contextual lens for understanding the academic disengagement for Black men. By examining African Americans' academic dilemmas and challenges through this contextual lens, we will offer strategies that can be employed to encourage Black male achievement. The article will first provide an overview of the experience of African American men throughout the educational pipeline. Furthermore, it will provide an overview of critical theory, focusing specifically on critical pedagogy through which to explore the academic disengagement for Black men. We will then relate pedagogy's conceptualization of the hidden curriculum and how it affects African American men within the larger social context. Specifically, we argue that the hidden curriculum that exists outside of the classroom, namely media, plays a significant role in our discussion. We conclude with implications for parents, teachers, educational administrators, and policy makers.

A Review of the Literature on African American Men

The Status of African American Men in Elementary and Secondary Education

The social science literature is replete with bleak conditions and experiences of African American men in education (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Davis, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Moore, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008). Researchers note that terms such as *endangered*, *uneducable*, *dysfunctional*, and *dangerous* are often used to describe Black men (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1992; Parham & McDavis, 1987; Strayhorn, 2008). According to Jackson and Moore, these characterizations of African American men are noticeable in the social domain of education.

Research has shown that academic problems hindering the educational progress of Black men begin early, impinging their ability to graduate from high school (Davis, 2003; Epps, 1995; Howard-Hamilton, 1997). In elementary and secondary education, teachers and counselors are far more likely to impose negative expectations upon African American men as it relates to

attending college than their White counterparts (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Epps, 1995; Jones, 2002; Ogbu, 2003). Black men are also disproportionately disciplined, more apt to face expulsions, and suspended longer and more frequently than White students (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992; Polite & Davis, 1999).

African American men are far more likely to be underrepresented in gifted education programs or advanced placement courses (Jackson & Moore, 2006). Teachers and counselors disproportionately track Black men into low-academic-ability classrooms, whereas many of their White counterparts are placed in advanced courses that prepare them for college placement in competitive institutions. In some educational settings, African American men are more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to be marginalized, stigmatized, and labeled with behavior problems (Noguera, 2003). Black men are also overwhelmingly concentrated in special education and are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded and labeled as having learning disabilities (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2007; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Noguera, 2003). Research has shown that the educational experiences of African Americans impinge upon their ability to graduate from high school, manifesting in high rates of illiteracy and unemployment (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992). Even when Black men graduate from high school, because of the lack of parity between the quality of education between them and their White, more affluent counterparts, often times, African Americans are deficient in crucial academic skills sets. In her book, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, hooks (2004) notes:

> Literacy skills are not taught to [African American] males. Educational systems fail to impart or inspire learning in African American males of all ages. . . . Many African American males graduate from high schools reading and writing on a third or fourth grade level. (pp. 40-41)

It is estimated that approximately 44% of Black men are functionally illiterate (Blake & Darling, 1994). African American men with lower educational attainment are predisposed to inferior employment prospects, low wages, poor health, and are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (Harvey, 2008; Levin et al., 2007).

African American Men and Higher Education

The educational problems and issues that African American men experience in elementary and secondary schools are not endemic to those educational

settings. Similar trends can be noted in postsecondary education. Although the number of Black men entering higher education increased substantially during the late 1960s and again during the 1980s and 1990s, African American men continue to lag behind their female and White male counterparts with respect to college participation, retention, and degree completion rates (Noguera, 2003; Polite & Davis, 1999). In 2000, Levin et al. (2007) noted that African American men between the ages of 26 and 30 on average had 0.72 fewer years of education than their White male counterparts.

According to researchers (Green, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008), the number of Black men in prison exceeds those in postsecondary institutions. "Approximately one in four African American males between the ages of 20 and 29 are incarcerated, on probation, or on parole . . . only one in five is enrolled in a two- or four-year college program" (Prothrow-Stith, 1993, p. 163). More recently, Green notes that in 2000, there were 188,550 more African American men incarcerated than enrolled in institutions of higher education.

Whereas research has shown a relationship between educational attainment and income (Bush & Bush, 2005; Cuyjet, 1997; Jackson & Moore, 2006), Black men's enrollment and competition rates in higher education are dismal compared to other groups, most notably their female counterparts (Cross & Slater, 2000; Jackson & Moore, 2006). Recent research has noted a gender disparity between African American men and women as it relates to college attendance and completion (Ferguson, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009; Polite & Davis, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008). Data from the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* ("African American Women Continue to Hold Huge Lead Over Black Men," 2008) reiterates this gender disparity by noting that in 2006, African American women earned 94,341 bachelor's degrees compared to 48,079 awarded to Black men.

This gender disparity is not endemic to African Americans. Surprisingly, however, gender disparities are most pronounced among Blacks (Cuyjet, 2006; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Polite & Davis, 1999; Ross, 1998; Strayhorn, 2008). Roach (2001) emphasized this trend by noting though Black women are scoring big gains in education, particularly at the college level, the progress for African American men has either stagnated or increased minimally from year to year.

A Review of Explanations for the Educational Disengagement of African American Men

Researchers have put forth several theories and philosophies to explain the dismal academic performance and progress of African American men. One

such theory is "Acting White"—a theoretical concept that Fordham and Ogbu (1986) proposed to explain the academic disengagement of African Americans. Although this concept has generated opposition (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005), Fordham and Ogbu posited that African Americans have formed an oppositional culture, which stems from the oppression, enslavement, and discrimination they have experienced in America. Not only does this oppositional culture act as a bulwark between Blacks and White America, it also provokes African Americans to persuade their same-race peers to devalue academic success because of its association with "acting White." Specifically, Fordham and Ogbu notes:

> schooling is perceived by Blacks, especially by Black adolescents, as learning to act White. . . . In our view . . . the academic learning and performance problems of Black children arise not only from a limited opportunity structure and Black people's responses to it, but also from the way Black people attempt to cope with the burden of "acting White." (p. 201)

Lundy (2003) stated that African Americans indoctrinated with this ideology of "acting White" view academically inclined African Americans as abandoning their Black cultural identity and rejecting the norms of their peers as well as the peer group itself. Compounding this phenomenon of "acting White" is the job ceiling that precludes minorities from attaining employment and financial status compared to their White counterparts with comparable academic credentials. Fordham and Ogbu noted that the job ceiling casts disillusionment about the real value of schooling, which discourages Blacks from working hard to excel in school.

Although research from Lundy (2003) supported this theory of "acting White," he has also asserted that this theory is more applicable to African American men than women (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; hooks, 2004; Lundy, 2003, 2005; Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003). Davis (2003) explained that African American men tend to perform poorly academically because they perceive schooling as contradictory to their masculinity. Majors and Billson agreed with Davis' assertion. They argue that Black men have developed a cool pose—that is, a coping mechanism used to become acclimated to their environment and to communicate masculinity. Majors and Billson point out a cool persona aids in sustaining the balance between the Black "male's inner life and his social environment" (p. 9). Furthermore, they contend "the cool front of Black masculinity is crucial for preservation of pride, dignity,

and respect. It is a way for Black males to express bitterness, anger, and distrust toward the dominant society" (p. 9). This cool pose propels African American men to become indifferent toward education as a form of social advancement.

Other researchers (e.g., Farley, 1993; Robinson, 2000; West, 2001) explain that discrimination is another factor, prohibiting African American men from advancing through the educational pipeline. Specifically, Farley argues racial prejudices cripple the social and educational progress of Blacks. Hale (2001) concurs with the positions described. Hale argues by sending African Americans to inferior schools, resulting in inferior skills and credentials, White Americans maintain the oppression of Blacks. She notes that under the guise of freedom and opportunity, African Americans are blamed for their own plight. She notes, however, that racism is actually the culprit preventing Blacks from educational parity with their White counterparts.

Negative images that African American men are exposed to at an early age through the mass media have also been attributed to their academic disengagement (hooks, 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Palmer & Hilton, 2008). The media rarely focuses on positive accomplishments of Black men. Instead, they commonly use their public platform to perpetuate and instigate negative stereotypical depictions of African Americans. Consequently, African American men are victimized by these images (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002; Moore, 2000). The media, in this sense, widely contributes to the problems that African American men's experience in education.

The most contemporary thought for the academic problems of African Americans is stereotype threat. Although this theory does not focus on the academic disengagement of Blacks, it focuses on the achievement disparity between African Americans, particularly Black men, and their White counterparts. Nevertheless, it still provides another lens from which to view the underachievement of African Americans. Claude Steele and his colleagues believed that stereotype threat—that is, the "threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype," (Steele, 1999, p. 46) negatively influences the academic performance of African Americans. In support of his theory, Steele and his colleagues tested the theory of stereotype threat by conducting studies in which groups of students were exposed to a set of stereotypes before completing an academic task. Steele and his colleagues hypothesized that the performance of the group, sensitive to the stereotype, would be negatively impacted. Their results indicated a relationship between stereotype threat and task performance when academic ability is measured.

Conversely, when academic ability was not measured, the task for the group was not impaired. Other researchers (Croizet et al., 2004; Fries-Britt, 1998; Moore, 2000; Osborne, 2001; Steele, 1999; Taylor & Antony, 2000) also support stereotype threat and how it may impact African American students in their research. Unlike "acting White," the research on stereotype threat is not disaggregated by gender to indicate that stereotype threat is only applicable to Black men. Research, however, has shown that stereotype threat is applicable to African Americans at predominantly White universities

A Review of Literature on Critical Theory

Critical Theory: Another Method to Examine the Academic Disengagement for African American Men

Critical theory provides another forum to examine disparities in education for Black men. Critical theories, as there is no unified critical theory (Held, 1980; Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000), repudiate the scientific approach, arguing it is irrelevant to the study of human phenomenon (Giroux, 1983; Kincheloe, 2001). Instead, this theory perceives human affairs as socially constructed, "humanly determined and interpreted, and hence subject to change through human means" (Gibson, 1986, p. 4).

Critical theory represents an integration of diverse philosophical approaches. For example, critical theory is concerned with nature of truth, reason, and beauty, which was derived by the German idealistic thought. The theory's concern with social transformation was extrapolated from Marxism (Gibson, 1986). Furthermore, the notion of critique emanated from Kant's philosophical approach. Finally, the theory's idea of an emergence of spirit came from the Hegelian philosophy (Held, 1980). Fundamental to this theory is the process of self-conscious critique. Such a process provides a basis to interpret interactions among individuals, school, and society.

Culture is an interesting phenomenon to critical theory because it is the manifestation of human consciousness shaped by daily living (Gibson, 1986). Critical theorists posit that humans are responsible for their futures. Thus, critical theory aims to empower people to deal with real problems by addressing issues in their own lives, such as the biases and distortions, which may preclude healthy personal and social growth. In employing this framework, critical theory emphasizes transformation to promote new truth for individuals and society (Gibson, 1986; Kincheloe, 2001).

Critical theory aims to promote enlightenment—that is, cognizant of the "sociocultural, political, and economic forces that shape our consciousness

and identity" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 128) to conditions of the social world. Such enlightenment forms the disclosure of the interests of individuals and groups. Critical theory defines interest as partiality toward a particular group (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Gibson (1986) explained that the dominant group has an interest in maintaining the status quo to protect their advantages.

The purpose of enlightenment is to emancipate and guide individuals from oppression. Enlightenment frees the world from the chains of superstition, ignorance, and suffering (Giroux, 1983). According to Kincheloe and McLaren, enlightenment unveils the "winners" and "losers" in social arrangements "and the process by which such power play operate" (p. 281). As previously mentioned, issues of power, culture, and hegemony were significant philosophical issues to early critical theorists (Gibson, 1986; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). These issues of struggle remain vital to critical theorists today. Gibson argued that hegemony is indicative of the way in which the dominant class influences the social paradigms of the subjugated groups. One of the conduits the dominant group uses to influence the social behavior and beliefs of other groups is the media, which supposedly prescribes appropriate cultural conformity. In turn, this process of social indoctrination circumvents the development of critical consciousness and emancipation in subjugated group members (Kincheloe & McLaren). In this way, the hegemonic classes do not forcibly dominate oppressed groups. Rather, they control subordinate groups through a passive consent (Gibson). In essence, the oppressed groups work to support the interest of the dominant groups. By doing so, they consent to their own oppression. Other issues of importance to critical theorists today are the replication of "oppressive social patterns and the viability of social transformation" (Giroux, p. 25) and the role in which school plays in this phenomenon.

Critical Theory in Education

Critical educational theorists have used critical theory to examine inequalities and injustices in education. Critical theorists do not place blame on the student for school failure or underachievement. Instead, student underachievement and/or failure are attributed to social structure and processes. According to critical theorists, answers to questions, such as "Why do children fail?" and "Why do schools fail to eradicate inequality?" lies in the fact that the economic structure demands and ensures those outcomes. Critical theorists note that "the economic system is unequal and unfair (in power, wealth, opportunity, and so on). School mirrors that system, are subordinate to it, determined by it, and therefore function to reproduce it" (Gibson, 1986, p. 47).

According to critical theorists, the primary function of schools is to maintain status quo. Gibson contends that schools are a means of reproducing "the power and ideology of the state by providing appropriately socialized workers into economic and political structure" (1986, p. 49). Paulo Freire argues that "education is concerned with the transmission of knowledge, but education is controlled by the ruling class, and to protect their interests . . . the ruling class ensures that the knowledge transmitted serves those ends . . ." (Shor, 1992, p. 51).

Another illustration of critical theory's application to education is Freire's concept of social pedagogy. Shor (1992) noted that "social pedagogy defines education as one place where the individual and society are constructed, a social action which can either empower or domesticate students" (p. 25). With this construct, teachers may pose problems based on students' lives, social issues, or academic subjects. In a Freirean critical classroom, educators reject the methods, which make students passive. Instead, educators pose critical problems to students and encourage curiosity.

A Freirean educator may encourage students to question rather than to merely answer questions. In this sense, educators are creating possibilities for the construction of new knowledge (Freire, 1998). In this framework, the aim for students is to become proactive and learn to reconstruct the way in which they see themselves, their society, and education. The Freirean approach rejects the concept of banking in education in which the student is viewed as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. To the contrary, Freire argues that knowledge is not a gift given to those who view themselves as knowledgeable, to share with those with whom know nothing. Instead, learning is a simultaneous process that takes place between the teacher and the student. Undergirding Freire's theory of social pedagogy is a critique of hegemony and a commitment to challenge injustice. From a democratic perspective, Freire viewed society as being controlled by an elite group, which assumes that its culture and values are supreme. In school, this is manifest in the required syllabi, mandated textbooks, tracking, and standardized exams.

Critical Pedagogy and Curriculum

Critical educational theorists have used critical pedagogy—a variation of critical theory to examine a school's curriculum. Critical educational theorists view the curriculum as more than a program of study. Instead, it is indicative of a particular form of life. This curriculum serves to prepare students for hegemonic or subordinate positions in society. Critical theorists point out in as much as there is a curriculum that is overt— there is a

curriculum that is covert, referred to as the hidden curriculum. McLaren argues that the hidden curriculum focuses on the subtle ways in which knowledge and behavior are constructed, outside the traditional course materials and scheduled lessons. McLaren states "it is part of the bureaucratic and managerial press of the school-the combined forces by which students are induced to comply with dominant ideologies and social practices related to authority, behavior, and morality" (p. 184). Succinctly, the hidden curriculum is based on learning outcomes not openly acknowledged by the learners (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1989).

Critical Theory and the Educational Disengagement of African American Men

As discussed previously, critical theory asserts that society is orchestrated in such a way to help the dominant class maintain their hegemony and the subservient classes maintain their oppression. In this article, we draw from a tenet of critical theory—that is, critical pedagogy to provide a new contextual lens for understanding the educational disengagement of Black men. Specifically, we are using critical pedagogy's conceptualization of the hidden curriculum as a method to explore the underachievement of African American men. In using this tenet, we are applying this notion of a hidden curriculum to a larger societal context. We argue that a hidden curriculum exists within the confines of the media, a connection that many people would not normally see as related. In applying this notion, we are asserting that the dominant class uses the media to discourage the academic achievement of African American men.

In making this claim, we think about the media, television, and other forms of propaganda, and how they have been used to continuously cast African Americans, specifically, Black men in a negative light. Television news is one such example. According to research, news coverage primarily associates African Americans with issues of criminality than Whites (Entman, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Oliver, 2003). This is particularly true for African American men (Oliver, 2003). Many of these news organizations perpetuate negative, stereotypical images of African American men. In a study conducted by Oliver, it was concluded there is an overrepresentation of Blacks engaging in criminal activities in media images. Particularly, in news and reality TV, Black men are portrayed as "dangerous, and present information about Black suspects that assumes their guilt" (p. 15). Another study that involved observing local news for a 2-week period in the Los Angeles area showed that African Americans were more likely to be represented as

perpetrators than as victims of crime compared to their White counterparts (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Research suggests that the media characterization of Blacks may heighten stereotypical viewpoints of African Americans among Whites and other racial and ethnic groups (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Oliver, 2003). Furthermore, according to Staples (1982), how a Black man "is perceived in the public consciousness, interpreted in the dominant media [is] ultimately how he comes to see and internalize his own role" (p. 1 as cited by Holmes, 2008).

Television shows, movies, video games, and music videos on network and cable television are other examples that further illustrate the above points. Cable television outlets are another example that comes to mind. For example, Black Entertainment Television (BET) has endured much criticism because of the videos and television shows that it airs.

Critics claim that many of these videos glorify the thug life for Black men, portray women as sex objects, and the Black community as unreasonably obsessed with sex, money, and drugs. Rarely are positive images of African American men depicted on BET and other major networks. According to Rev. Delman L. Coates in an article by Zook (2008) in *Vibe Magazine*:

> BET continue to market what are essentially pornographic images and messages, images that glorify drug use and criminal activity to teenagers and to children everyday. It's becoming a public safety matter when young people constantly see images that encourages them to do drugs, to commit crime, to shoot one another. (p. 94)

Television is not alone in its portrayal of African American men. Radio stations have also met with community outrage over what is viewed as their role in promoting the gangster life style, drug use, materialism, and disrespect toward public authority, flagrant swearing, and objectification of women. Youth in society emulate what they see and hear through mainstream rap heard on hip hop radio stations and view on VH1, MTV2, and other media outlets. Most important, the younger generations are negatively influenced to believe that it is acceptable to objectify women, sell drugs, and make quick, easy money. Equally important, say critics, is that these are the negative images of Black men broadcasted to other countries around the world.

Scholars have indirectly supported our viewpoint of the impact of the hidden curriculum on African American men by noting that majors institutions in society is orchestrated to systematically oppress people of color, specifically, Black men. For example, according to Bell (2004) and Franklin (1965),

the United States has a history of engendering separate worlds, in the context of equity, for Blacks and Whites. Furthermore, Feagin (2006) noted that practices within society are predicated on the White racial frame—"an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate," which favors Whites and "their access to the ultimate power and privilege over people of color" (p. 226). Moreover, Fitzgerald (2009) argued, "Contemporary coverts racist components continue to be embedded within all major institutions in an effort to immobilize and control Blacks, with a unique emphasis targeting Black males" (p. 226). He also argued that the hegemony culture has a vested interest in keeping Blacks oppressed. Specifically, he noted that if African Americans were to achieve parity as their White counterparts, they would "desire to leave the role of laborer, which would have threatened the established system of legal and de facto bondage" (p. 227). Furthermore, Fitzgerald noted that attempts to socially control and oppress Black men starts early in public education where there is an overrepresentation of Black men in special education, "a disproportionate use of alternative school placement, and corporal punishment with Black males" (p. 227).

Recommendations

In this article, we have posited that the media acts as a hidden curriculum and uses negative images to stymie the educational engagement of African American men. As parents, educators, and policy makers what can we do to combat this hidden curriculum? Parents can be cognizant of what their children watch and how it affects their self-perception and self-efficacy. In addition, parents should monitor what their children watch on television or music they listen to that demean or perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans, particularly Black men. Discussions with their children that center on this topic will help bring a better understanding about these negative portrayals. Parents can also attempt to create an environment where their children are surrounded with positive images of African Americans. For both African American and non–African American children, they should be encouraged to read books and magazines that focus on the high value that African Americans hold about education. Examples of such books include Ben Carson's *Think Big*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *The PACT*, a book written by three African American medical doctors. Parents raising Black children should also instill in their children a "can do" attitude and impress upon them that education is a "gateway to opportunity."

Teachers who work with African American students, particularly, Black men can play a critical role in addressing negative portrayals by the media, music, and various forms of visual imagery. Teachers can use their classrooms as an effective forum for combating the impact of the hidden curriculum. Specifically, they can decorate their classrooms with positive images of African American men and assign readings that will serve as a source of inspiration for students and encourage them to think that education is a necessary prerequisite for social and economic advancement. Teachers can also encourage young Black professional men to come to their class and speak to all of their students. These young professionals should be encouraged to speak about their trials and tribulations, and focus particularly on their educational pathways, which enabled them to get to their current position in life.

In addition to teachers taking on an effective role in the classroom, teachers must take an active role in facilitating their own learning about the crisis affecting the educational experience of African American men. This learning can take place in a few ways. For those who are training to be teachers, teacher education programs must facilitate ways that encourage would-be teachers to know themselves and confront their own biases about various racial groups, in particular, African American men. For teachers who are already in the classroom, professional development programs must be carefully facilitated so that it does not just become an "informational" session but one that encourages them to deal with their own racial biases and how to effectively deal with these issues.

Finally, policy makers can play a role in helping to construct a bulwark—that is, a protection shield, which serves to prevent the negative characterizations of African Americans from having an impact on the psyche of Blacks. Policy makers can work collaboratively with those involved in the media to discourage bias media reporting. Instead of having the reporters and journalists focus on the violent acts of one group, they should be encouraged to report the violent acts of all groups. Research from Oliver (2003) supported this recommendation by asserting that media producers should go to great length to "alleviate the types of biased portrayals that are unfortunately a common occurrence" (pp. 15-16). Journalists and reporters should also encourage a sense of balance in reporting the news. In other words, the reporters should focus not only on negative but also positive news about African American men. Critical collaboration between policy makers and the media will also encourage better censorship in television, cable, and radio. In many cases, this would serve as an effective means to prevent negative images of certain groups from being exposed to young people, particularly Blacks.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide a new paradigm for the academic disengagement for African American men. Although previous scholars and researchers have devised various theories and philosophies that attempts to explain the academic disparities of Black men in higher education, this article has asserted that the hidden curriculum, emanating from critical theory, might be another contextual lens to explore the academic disengagement of African American men. In the context of the hidden curriculum as it relates to society, we think that the media, television, and other forms of propaganda have been used to continuously cast Blacks, specifically, African American men in a negative light. Television often portrays Blacks in unfavorable roles in comparison to Caucasians. Typically these unfavorable depictions reinforce negative stereotypes associated with African Americans. Research indicates that television portrayals can influence people's attitudes toward one another. Television's general portrayal of African Americans perpetuates negative stereotypes, and the number of Black-oriented programs offering positive images is limited in number. Though the television industry does not have a monopoly on stereotyping, it gets considerable help from the motion-picture industry.

Because perception creates reality, the misinformation conveyed in the depictions of African American is troublesome. Stereotypical presentations do a tremendous disservice to Blacks and the well-being of our society. Through theory and empirical research, we know that people's attitudes and at times their behaviors are a reflection of what is seen on television, what is heard on the radio, and what is perceived through other people's actions; however, educational leaders and officials must combat the hidden curriculum within the media and learn ways to promote and embrace effective and transformational teaching and learning throughout the educational landscape.

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Note

1. The terms "African American" and "Black" are used interchangeably in this manuscript.

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