

## IN MY OPINION IN MY OPINION IN MY OPINION

# Teaching Black Male Students

*To close the achievement gap, the education of Black male students must provide a foundation of historical and self-identity.*

By Baruti K. Kafele

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*The major premise of effective education must be “self-knowledge.” In order to achieve the goals of identity and empowerment, the educational process must be one that educes the awareness of who we are. This is not anything that’s terribly mystical or complex. It really makes intuitive sense about what education should be.*

—Na’im Akbar, *Know Thy Self*

Principals face endless challenges every day. The overall success of their schools is predicated in large part on the decisions that principals make to address those challenges, which include budgetary issues, facility issues, behavioral issues, and personnel issues. But academic achievement lies at the core of everything that principals do. If unsound academic decisions are made, everything else is for naught.

After looking at current state and national student achievement data, I think the greatest academic challenge facing principals today—urban principals in particular—is the plight of the Black male learner. It is no secret that the overall achievement levels of Black male students continue to be dismally low in comparison to their White and Asian counterparts, and their graduation rates are particularly alarming. According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2008), only 47% of Black male students graduate from high school. In some cities, the graduation rates are as low as 19%.

Those data pose enormous challenges for principals. Schools and school districts can no longer rely on aggregate assessment data under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to carry a school as was done in the past: subgroups must also demonstrate proficiency, which forces all educators to reexamine the strategies and practices that are being implemented to raise achievement levels. Black males

present an added challenge for educators because they are not considered a subgroup, but rather a portion of a subgroup that is struggling nationally.

Currently, there are a wide variety of effective strategies that schools use to try to raise the achievement levels of all students, including:

- Increased professional development
- Research-based mathematics and literacy programs
- After-school programs
- Smaller class sizes
- Small learning communities
- School-level planning and shared decision making
- More teachers with content-area expertise
- Increased exposure to technology
- Enhanced parental involvement.

Despite the merits of those strategies, the data bear out that Black male students continue to perform alarmingly low in comparison to all other categories of students. What are we doing wrong? What’s missing from the repertoire of strategies being used to raise the achievement levels of Black males? I believe there is a missing component, and it must be given serious consideration if schools truly expect to make progress toward closing the ever-widening gap in student achievement.

### The Missing Component

Carter G. Woodson (1933), the founder of Black History Month, said

in *The Mis-education of the Negro*:

When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his proper place and stay in it. You do not have to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (p. xix)

I believe that this quote sums up the plight of Black student underachievement—particularly among male students. The problem is not that Black students cannot achieve at the same levels as their White and Asian counterparts; the problem is the absence of a significant aspect of instruction that school leaders must address. Within this national crisis is the crisis of the individual, the crisis of self. There is a large disconnect in the Black community between the past and present that results in children not understanding who they are in a historical and cultural context.

Lacking that context, and thereby an African-centered cultural identity, many students do not have a solid foundation upon which to stand and consequently no sense of purpose, mission, and vision for their education. School becomes irrelevant to their individual needs, interests, and aspirations because they fail to see themselves in the curriculum and instruction and therefore fail to make the connection between school and their individual or collective growth and development. They are out of touch with their history and culture because

of the absence of a sustained exposure to their history in their classrooms, an absence that has roots all the way back to the institution of slavery.

The challenge to school leaders in general and principals in particular is to ensure that this missing component is infused into classroom instruction in all subject areas to increase the probability that Black students will see education as relevant to their own lives. Self-crisis is manifested on the following levels:

- Self-identity: Who am I?
- Self-image: How do I see myself?
- Self-esteem: How do I feel about myself?
- Self-discipline: Am I in control of myself?
- Self-respect: Do I bring honor to myself?
- Self-actualization: What am I doing to maximize my potential?

Closing the achievement gap requires raising the achievement levels of Black male students and is contingent upon understanding and being willing to address the crisis of self. To do so, principals must ensure that classroom instruction is culturally relevant, culturally appropriate, and culturally responsive to all the learners in the classroom. This requires strategies that will not only effectively educate their Black male students but also keep them inspired about learning and motivated to excel.

### **Instilling Self-Knowledge**

The challenge for principals is to ensure that culturally responsive instruction is occurring in all classrooms. Educator and historian Asa Hilliard (1998) wrote, "We do not know who we are, cannot explain how we got



*Principal Kafele talks to students during Power Monday, a young men's empowerment meeting that he holds each week.*

Photos courtesy of the author



here, and have no sense of our destiny beyond mere survival” (p. 3). But to address their self-crisis and subsequently close the gap in achievement, Black male students must have the capacity to:

- Study, learn, and understand who they are in the context of their history and culture
- Study, learn, and understand relevant models, lessons, and examples in African and African American history
- Analyze and understand African and African American history in an effort to analyze and understand present reality
- Apply their knowledge of African and African American history to their own reality
- Understand their roles in the continuum of history.

In addition, teachers must:

- Recognize that the omission of African and African American history and African-centered research material is a contributing factor to Black male underachievement

- Engage in the study of African history and the African experience in an effort to enlighten themselves
- Know the research about how Black children learn and how to keep Black males motivated
- Attend conferences and workshops that address culturally responsive teaching and learning
- Apply research-based strategies in the classroom.

If we educators are truly serious about raising the achievement levels of Black male students, we must change how we approach their education. When I was an elementary classroom teacher from 1992 to 1998, my students, 99% of whom were Black and 85% of whom received free and reduced-price lunch, consistently performed at the highest levels on standardized assessments. When I became a middle school principal in 1998 and was in my first assignment, my students outscored the students in all other schools with similar demographics in New Jersey. The difference was that I was committed to ensuring that

all my students had a solid knowledge and understanding of who they were both historically and culturally.

I was—and continue to be—convinced that if my students lacked that foundation, they would also lack an educational purpose, mission, and vision. As a teacher, this conviction required that I learn as much as I could about how to infuse culturally responsive instruction into my lesson planning. As a principal, it required that I give my teachers the kind of information, resources, and professional development that they needed to effectively motivate, educate, and empower the students whom they taught.

I am convinced that until culturally responsive instruction and learning is given serious consideration, we will continue to experience the problems in achievement among Black male students that necessitated NCLB in the first place. We must come to the realization that what we are currently doing is ineffective. We must understand that the problem is not that Black males cannot achieve at proficiency levels in reading and math. We must come to the realization that there is a much deeper issue that underscores overall classroom performance and that educators and principals must address it. **PL**

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