MR. NIGGER
The Challenges of Educating
Black Males Within American Society

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The underachievement, lack of inclusion, and backward progression of African American men within American society, and particularly within the educational arena, has once again surfaced as a trend that demands immediate attention. However, the challenges of reversing the negative circumstances facing African American men requires transforming a broad array of social, political, economical, psychological, and educational issues that are deeply rooted in the very power structure of America. On one hand, the society espouses rhetoric of concern and desire to elevate Black males, but, on the other hand, practices a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disregard. Put differently, the experience of the Black man in America seems to be one in which he is called "mister" but is treated with a "niggardly" regard. And the result is the positioning of Black males at the lower rungs of society and their experiencing underachievement in almost all aspects of life.

Keywords: *Black male achievement; African American education; educational diversity; African American male education; African American student achievement*

I am invisible. Misunderstood, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or fragments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 8)

—Ralph Ellison (1952)

Though not a new phenomena, the underachievement, lack of inclusion, and backward progression of African American men

within American society, and particularly within the educational arena, has once again surfaced as a trend that demands immediate attention. However, the challenges of reversing the negative circumstances facing African American men is daunting and requires working on the plight of the individual and transforming a broad array of social, political, economical, psychological, and educational issues that are deeply rooted in the very power structure of America. The challenge reflects a social oxymoron: seeking to advance the status of a population that the larger society has systematically oppressed. On one hand, society espouses rhetoric of concern and desire to elevate Black males, but on the other hand, society practices a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disregard. Put differently, the experience of the Black man in America seems to be one in which he is called "mister" but is treated with a "niggardly" regard. And the result is the positioning of Black males at the lower rungs of society and their experiencing underachievement in almost all aspects of life.

In the needs assessment for the African American Men of Arizona State University (AAMASU) program, the university noted that Black males experience a high level of underachievement in the higher education arena, overinvolvement in the criminal system, and high rates of unemployment, poverty, and dying via homicide (Arizona State University, 2004). According to this literature, African American males are disproportionately represented among those students who are forced to withdraw, have low academic performance, and report negative college experiences. Additionally, the 1996 graduation rate for African American males at 300 of the nation's largest colleges dropped from 35% to 33% (Arizona State University, 2004). The high school drop-out rate for Black males is also high with 20% to 30% of urban Black male youth leaving school prior to graduation (Noguera, 1997). Additionally, it is now estimated that 44% of all Black men are functionally illiterate (Noguera, 1997). Outside of the educational arena, approximately 39.8% more Black men are involved in the criminal system than enrolled in an institution of higher learning; one in five Black men live in poverty as opposed to 1 in 12 for White men, and Black men hold an unemployment rate that is 2.3 times higher than White men (Ari-

zona State University, 2004). Within the professional arena, Black men earn 73% of the income of White males, with the average Black male with a college degree earning less than the average White male with a high school diploma (Noguera, 1997). Death is an additional factor constantly confronting African American men. According to the AAMASU data (Arizona State University, 2004), African American men are 14 times more likely to die of murder than White men. Noguera (1997) also notes that the rate of homicide among Black men ages 15 to 24 is the highest for any group within the U.S. population, and the suicide rate has surpassed that of their White male counterparts. The reality that Black male youth have a 50% higher chance of dying by age 20 is overwhelming as it creates a sense of urgency to not only better prepare Black men for college, but also to extend their probability of even living to the college years (Blake & Darling, 1994).

Therefore, service to Black men within the field of education must consider and include the factors confronting Black men outside of the classroom—in their homes, communities, and minds. The intersection of this complex lived experience is having dramatic consequences in the classroom. In Garibaldi's (1992) study of the New Orleans public school system, he found that although Black male youth only represented 43% of the educational community, they accounted for 58% of the nonpromotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the dropouts. Clearly, the educational system is yet another structure of dissonance for Black male youth. Noguera (1997) refers to prior research that has shown the tendency for student groups that are labeled deficient; disadvantaged; dysfunctional; or, in many cases, merely different to be provided inferior educational service. This definitely seems to hold true for Black men at all levels of education, thus closing the road to social mobility on which many Black men once traveled via the medium of education (Noguera, 1997).

This literature review examines the systems (educational, societal, and cultural) in which Black men are involved and these systems' role in contributing to or retarding the healthy growth and development of Black men, with the goal of developing a more holistic understanding of the Black male experience.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

> History is a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. History tells a people where they have been, what they have been, where they are and what they are. Most importantly, history tells a people where they still must go, what they still must be. The relationship of history to a people is the same as the mother to her child.
>
> —John Henrike Clarke (Bourne, 1996)

Undoubtedly, the current state of life for many Black men is chaotic in nature. This is not a new state of being for Black men, but rather a reflection of society's inability to make substantial and long-lasting change for the betterment of this population. The African American experience became a chaotic one beginning roughly during the years between 1641, when a Virginia court first made the distinction between a White and a Black indentured servant, sentencing the latter to a lifetime of servitude, and 1664, when the New Netherlands fell to the British, creating New York and New Jersey and the subsequent capitulation articles became the first to recognize slavery as a legal institution (Schneider & Schneider, 2001). Within these two decades, life began to slowly change for the small, largely male population of Africans indentured and eventually enslaved in America. These changes occurred yearly and took place not only in the communities of labor and neighborhoods of plantations, but also more importantly in courtrooms and offices of local government. A lifestyle of disenfranchisement did not just happen upon African American people, but was instead intentionally ingrained in the very structure of America.

> Slaves born in Africa who came to North America exchanged the temporary chaos and suffering of the middle passage for the confusion and hardship of life in a strange land. . . . Almost always the slave traders and slave owners who received them treated them as savages to be subdued, workers whose power had to be harnessed, and sources of profit—not as human beings. The slaves had been stripped of their status, their names, their families, and friends, and their customs and culture. They were surrounded by fear, distrust,

and sometimes hatred. . . . They stood naked to misery, not knowing what would happen to them. (Schneider & Schneider, 2001, p. 81)

America provided the answer to the questionable future of an enslaved African through the creation of laws that made slavery an increasingly miserable form of existence. From the 1662 Virginia law declaring that slave offspring inherit the status of the mother to the New York Assembly passing "An Act for Regulating Slaves" in 1702, prohibiting meetings of more than three slaves, trading by slaves, testimony by slaves, and creating the office of Common Whipper for slaves to the South Carolina legislature passing a comprehensive "Negro Act" prohibiting slaves from "freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom to raise food, to earn money, and to learn to read English, and restricting them to low quality, inexpensive clothing" and finally the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* case in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that a slave, an ex-slave, or a descendant of slaves cannot be a citizen of the United States and that Congress cannot prohibit slavery in the territories; the institution of slavery then set a standard of oppression that lingered in the years following its abolition and continues to persist within today's society (Schneider & Schneider, 2001, pp. 97).

At the same time that America was very quickly emerging as a super power and its citizens were establishing a legacy of wealth, African Americans were being stripped even of citizenship and later choked by the restraints of oppression.

The century following slavery, though improved, still proved to be oppressive and burdensome for African Americans. From reconstruction and the creation of new systems of segregation and often exploitive labor opportunities (sharecropping, crop liens, and peonage) to the Great Depression and the devastating impact that it had on a population that was already a low priority for the country to the persistent discrimination that African Americans encountered in education, housing, the military, employment, and politics, the legacy of Black disenfranchisement was passed down from one generation to the next. In many social arenas, Black participation is a relatively new phenomenon, particularly the arena of education.

America has more than a 300-year history of higher education; yet not more than 139 years ago, it was illegal for Blacks of any age to be taught to read. The deficit incurred by history is substantial and has had a generational impact on the African American community, the family unit, and the individual.

THE FAMILY UNIT

If a kid calls his grandmother mommy and his mother Pam, there's something wrong.

—Chris Rock (1999)

The American power structure and the history of oppression that it has created for African Americans have had a devastating effect on the African American family unit. Whether forcibly during slavery or as a voluntary reaction to life pressures, disruption to the immediate family unit is not new to Black families. Frederick Douglas, in his acclaimed autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (cited in Boyd & Allen, 1995), noted that it was a general practice among slave holders in the South to immediately separate an infant from its mother and to charge an elder enslaved woman with raising the children of the plantation (Boyd & Allen, 1995). This practice prevented infants from developing a strong attachment and allegiance to the mother and the mother from enacting the role of nurturer, which might distract her from her labor duties (Schneider & Schneider, 2001). Furthermore, as the practice of slavery grew as a domestic institution, so did the amount of slavery-specific laws in America. Enslaved African Americans could not enter into legal marriage as it was against the law for them to execute legal contracts (Schneider & Schneider, 2001). Thus, the majority of marriages were more of cultural rituals than legal institutions. Furthermore, the success of slavery as a business institution was in direct opposition to the formation of healthy family units among the enslaved. Often, husbands, wives, and children were separated through the trade or sometimes forced to remarry and break marriage bonds for the purpose of breeding.

Booker T. Washington argued that the lack of strong ancestral influence and knowledge among African Americans further deprives the Black child of a strong sense of self-efficacy:

> The influence of ancestry, however, is important in helping forward any individual or race, if too much reliance is not placed upon it. Those who constantly direct attention to the Negro youth's moral weaknesses, and compare his advancement with that of white youths, do not consider the influence of the memories which cling about the old family homesteads. . . . The very fact that the white boy is conscious that, if he fails in life, he will disgrace the whole family record, extending back through many generations, is of tremendous value in helping him to resist temptations. The fact that the individual has behind and surrounding him proud family history and connection serves as a stimulus to help him to overcome obstacles when striving for success. (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 25)

Though Black families throughout history have established strong family units and created their own ritualistic marriage bonds, despite the laws of the day, the direct and intentional role of society in stunting the growth of a family ethic within the African American community is important to note.

What has been the result? Marian Wright Edelman (1986) provided the devastating answers in her text, *Families in Peril*. Edelman provides the following statistics on the Black family in the decade of the 1980s:

> Black children are twice as likely to die in the first year of life, be born prematurely, live in substandard housing, have no parent employed, and live in institutions; three times as likely to be poor, live in a female headed household, be in foster care, and die of known child abuse; four times as likely to live with neither parent, be incarcerated between fifteen and nineteen years of age; five times as likely to live with a parent who never married. Only four out of every ten black children, compared to eight out of every ten white children live in two parent families. . . . In 1983, 58 percent of all births to Black women were out of wedlock. (pp. 2-3)

Edelman (1986) goes on to refer to William Wilson's belief that the delay in marriage and lower rate of remarriage, which contrib-

utes to the number of single-parent households, is most closely aligned with the lack of access provided to Black males within the labor market. According to both Edelman and Wilson, Black women are facing an increasingly small marriage pool of Black men (Edelman, 1986). They define marriageable as employed and economically stable. The mix of inferior education, persisting discriminatory practices, and an internalized sense of defeat has proved lethal to the young Black male and thus to the Black family. Edelman also asserts that an unwillingness to accept jobs perceived as low end and dead end and increased urbanization, desegregation, and the Black middle class flight to the suburbs "made a sense of hope more remote for the poor blacks left behind" (p. 16). Written in the late 1980s, Edelman's extensive critique of the Black family was too early to include another factor that has since had a devastating impact on the Black community: illegal drug use.

The introduction of drugs into the African American community in the late 1970s served to tranquilize an already socially numb community. The drug-trafficking trade offered alternatives for two very desperate populations: those seeking to nullify the pain of social strife and those for whom the door of opportunity seemed permanently closed (Boyd & Allen, 1995). The effect of participation in the drug scene thus created a subclass of drug-addicted or drug-selling parents. The Hughes Brother's film *Menace II Society* (Hughes & Hughes, 1994) tells the story of Cain, a young Black man born to a drug-selling father and a drug-addicted mother. The story begins with Cain explaining the early deaths of both parents, which resulted in being raised by his grandparents. Though loving and well-intentioned, it is clear early in the film that the years of disconnect and the extent of criminality within their poor, Los Angeles neighborhood was beyond the grandparents' ability to handle. But what is important to note is that though the grandparents may not have been able to adequately battle their changing community and to raise this child, they were willing. The film serves as a strong commentary on the generational change that occurred in the years following the Civil Rights era. Even in the most violent years of Jim Crow and facing a known enemy and constant threat, the level of parental abandonment and absenteeism

was not as prevalent. The American experience for many young African Americans in the post–Civil Rights era, though racially different, is not necessarily less hostile. As laws were passed desegregating society and providing equal access to African Americans, new and more psychologically damaging strategies of oppression were enacted (hooks, 2001). These strategies may have created a level of frustration and hopelessness unseen in the past, causing many to question their ability to do something as simple as live. With no real answers to why society had shut them out of accessing this supposedly new and available opportunity, drugs provided, if not an answer, at least solace.

The ill effect of drugs is then added to the long list of social crises befalling Black people: the deterioration of skilled and higher paying jobs in urban communities; less public support for public housing, health care, and education; the breakdown of the economic infrastructure of the ghetto; and newly adopted means of coercion by the corporate and private sector as a means of regulation (Boyd & Allen, 1995). Thus, even those families that did not succumb to the nullification of drugs still suffered from the social suffocation of oppression. And even in families that remained in tact, there could have still existed a strong level of disfunctionality. As Nathan McCall (1994) notes, the presence of a frustrated and oppressed parent can be a dangerous and destructive element in the household. Every member of the family is then affected by these issues as they prevent the parent from fully developing and actualizing the role of nurturer and encourager. As Monroe asserts,

> Boys growing up in the ghetto were made aware daily of how little value the larger society placed on the lives and, in a postindustrial age, the labor of poor black men. Their own fathers, too often, were casualties, those who stayed home and those who disappeared. The defeat of one generation begat defeatism in the next. (Boyd & Allen, 1994, p. 292)

With parents suffering a sense of defeatism, many Black children are then left to navigate the psychological and social oppressions that began for them at a very early age.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

What were you? Don't tell me Negro. What were you before you were given the name Negro?

—Malcolm X (1988)

One of the many factors influencing the current social status of Black people, and more particularly Black males, is psychological in nature: the persisting internalization of self-hatred, resulting in low self-concept. According to hooks (2001):

Most black thinkers acknowledge that internalized self hatred is more pronounced now than it was when the economic circumstances of black people were far worse, when there was no social integration. Too late, progressive black people and our allies in struggle learned that legalized racial integration would not change white supremacist perspectives. Since anti-racist individuals did not control mass media, the media became the primary tool that would be used and is still used to convince black viewers and everyone else of black inferiority. (p. 78)

hooks goes on to relate that as laws forced society to discontinue direct forms of racial prejudice, television became the new medium to disseminate stereotypical perspectives. And it proved even more successful then the first, as it reached an even greater audience and attacked Blacks even in the privacy of their own homes. In *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, Nathan McCall (1994) relates how, as a child, he would spend hours upon hours absorbing the images of White people on television, "drinking in the beauty of their ivory skin, which seemed purer, cleaner" (p. 9). Detrimental in those years of dual mediums (radio and TV), the effect is now almost devastating in the multimedia world of today. Now more than ever, young Black males are confronted with and unable to escape negative societal imaging. Even in surveying popular culture for this research, the films chronicling the "gangsta" and more stereotypical culture of Black men were more readily available than other films offering an alternative view. To give an example, in five video rental stores, Spike Lee's (1998) film *He Got Game*, which chronicles the life of

an incarcerated father and his star athlete son, was available in all; however, Lee's film *Get on the Bus*, which follows the journey of educated and working men to the Million Man March was not a part of the collection in any of the five stores.

Society and the level at which one interacts within society has a strong influence on one's psychological development, and more specifically one's development of self-concept.

> A society's ideology tells people about the nature of their society and about its place in the world. In this sense, a society's ideology gives structure to how group members define themselves and their experiences and also provides impetus for group action. . . . All Americans (Black, White, Hispanic, Asian and others) are exposed to pro-white socialization messages disseminated by the school system, mass media, and religious institutions. (Oliver, 1989, p. 18)

This statement speaks to the strong influence that the larger social structure has on one's ability to develop a positive sense of self. Today's Black male youth are experiencing an amount of access to social structures never experienced before. Religious institutions that were once segregated and that may espouse a pro-White religious ethic are not only accessible for African Americans to attend, but also are available via countless television and radio programs. The theatre doors are now open wide for Black youth to attend motion pictures that carry either overwhelmingly negative Black images or overly positive White ones. And these movies are further available via movie rental shops and pay-per-view channels or to purchase at local stores. Whereas a young McCall (1994) drank in the images and messages of television, today's youth are being drowned in the images and messages associated with mass media consumption. Unfortunately, the media agenda is not often set by Black men or women or even forward thinking and racially conscious White men or women.

> Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, Black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype. As a consequence, they are victimized by stereotypes that were first

articulated in the 19th century, but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day. Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of White supremacy is that Black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it (hooks, 2004, p. xii).

Rather than creating its own sense of self, African American community identity has largely been established in relation to the definitions given to it by the larger society. From language to religion, from images of beauty to images of success, African Americans have been taught by the dominant society how to speak, what to believe, how to look, and how to define success. Oliver (1989) further asserts that the "Americanization of Africans in America has resulted in Blacks being locked into the role of America's permanent outsiders" (p. 31). Thus, the identity and self-concept of Black males is one that has been developed and grown under a constant burden of negativity and otherness. This strained development has often resulted in low self-esteem, a negative self-concept, and the internalization of the role of villain. The social stereotype of villain and outcast seems to be inescapable for Black men at all levels, with the most disenfranchised embracing the role and the most affluent fighting against it, but all living in relation to it. As Martin Luther King stated, "Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery. No Lincolnian emancipation or Johnsonian civil rights bill can totally bring this kind of freedom" (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 737). Although necessary, laws and policies do more to regulate the behavior and psyche of the dominant culture than the behavior and psyche of the oppressed.

With no sense of ancestral accountability and facing current forms of familial disfunctionality and absorbing negative social imaging, healthy psychological development is not a reality for many Black youth. Therefore, when a Black male child enters the educational arena, what occurs there can serve to either solidify or change his negative images of self. Too often, however, the former occurs. Barclay, Duke, and Sullivan's (1996) film *America's Dream* tells the story of a Black male school principal educating in

the years of Jim Crow. The principal is faced with two conflicting choices: providing the healthy educational and psychological development of his pupils or meeting the external demands of the White educational power structure that set and controlled the educational agenda. In the story, a young male student paints a portrait of a Black Jesus, which the White superintendent orders to be removed from the school. The principal is then faced with the difficult choice of following orders or supporting his student. Though fictional in nature, the film provides a vivid example of the role that education plays in the psychological development of the Black male. At the movie's conclusion, the principal decides to resist the psychological abuse of pro-White educational messages and to support his student's right to "embrace his individual self, to make sure that he sees himself in everything he does and everything he believes" (Barclay, Duke, & Sullivan, 1996). It is ever more important that this same conscious regard to messages and imaging take place today within the classroom. A progressive classroom that fully nurtures Black male development is one that is conscious of the external psychological abuse confronting Black males and directly fights against it with strong and positive educational messages and images.

VIOLENCE & CRIMINALITY

Black males today live in a world that pays them the most attention when they are violently acting out. (p. 131)

—bell hooks (2004)

One of the prevailing negative societal images has been that of the Black man as a perpetuator of violence. From his being stereotyped as an animal and brute in the years of American enslavement to his current stereotypical image as a gangster and thug, the Black male has maintained the stereotypical status of menace to society. The Hughes Brothers' (1994) film was adequately named, as the movie illustrates the development of a young Black man that comes to embrace violence as a way of life and as a consequence of his

neighborhood, lack of opportunity, lack of a sense of hope, and lack of a positive and strong sense of self. In the movie, joining the world of violence and criminality seems almost natural, for the character Caine, as these were the only opportunities that immediately confronted him when he walked out of his door. His was a world of chaos, and his response to this world was chaotic, violent, and filled with rage. Nathan Hare suggests that the tendency for Black men to experience feelings of rage and to act out based on these feelings is natural:

> If one is truly cognizant of adverse circumstances, he would be expected through the process of reason to experience some emotional response . . . to paraphrase racist Rudyard Kipling, if you can keep calm while all around you is chaos, maybe you don't fully understand the situation. (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 727)

Nathan McCall (1994) phrases it another way, stating that "children have an enormous capacity to adapt to insanity" (p. 20). To look upon Black men who live in poverty, who have been shut out of employment and the economic infrastructure of America, who have been socially outcast from society, and who constantly confront death whether it be immediately in their own violent neighborhood or slowly via inadequate healthcare, nutrition, and stress, all caused by society's power structure, and ask why they are acting out suggests that maybe it is society that does not fully understand the situation.

In the past, the greatest threat of death for Black men came from the White American community. In his autobiography, Malcolm X recounts how the threat of dying via violence was a reality for the majority of the men in his family. He explains that his father had six brothers and that all but one of them died by violence. Malcolm X goes on to recount that in the end, his father was also eventually killed by a group of White men, and he strongly believed that he would also die by violence (which eventually he did; Boyd & Allen, 1995). The threat of violence has always existed for African American men. In fact, their migration into America was a violent one. However, the difference for today's youth is the nature of the threat and the origin of the rage.

These young Black men do not live with the day-to-day fear that they would be lynched or shot on the spot, with impunity for the shooter if they got out of their place. Yet these contemporary young Black men had and have a level of discomfort and rage that was and is far deeper than the anger of their fathers because their expectations were and are greater (hooks, 2001, p. 133)

The young Black males of today are experiencing greater disappointment and frustration with not being able to navigate and access a society that is supposed to be open. On one hand, Black men are provided access to view the massive amounts of wealth accumulated by those in the upper class via mediums of mass media, whether it be music, television, movies, or magazines. But on the other hand, they are not provided similar access to opportunities that would allow them to obtain such wealth. What then occurs is social teasing. When you tease and dangle food before a starving individual, not only will the teasing spark a level of insanity, but also it will drive the person to do almost anything to obtain the food. Many young Black youth are at that level of desperation, experiencing a willingness to do anything to make money. Today's youth do not want something as free as freedom like their ancestors; they are seeking their piece of the American pie and may be willing to steal it if necessary. And so with regard to violence and crime, there are two primary issues: rage that leads to acts of violence against other Black men; White men; and, in many cases, Black women and crime motivated by an inability to penetrate economic opportunity in society.

Nathan McCall (1994) echoes this sentiment in describing how he and his friends would prey on and beat up White boys when he was a youth: "Fucking up white boys made us feel real good inside . . . when we bum rushed white boys, it made me feel like we were beating all white people on behalf of all blacks" (p. 4). Masters notes that many Black men do not fear prison because it is a place that "welcomes a man who is full of rage and violence" (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 437). Another welcoming place is gang culture. The sense of belonging and social love present in gang membership is what largely attracts men to join gangs. Professor and scholar Michael Eric Dyson explains,

Especially for young black men whose life is at a low premium in America, gangs have fulfilled a primal need to possess a sense of social cohesion through group identity. Particularly when traditional avenues for the realization of personal growth, esteem, and self worth usually gained through employment and career opportunities, have been closed, young black men find gangs a powerful alternative. (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 330)

Though negative in nature, gang culture, for a long time, has served as an alternative social structure of inclusion for Black men—a place where black men could express their rage and speak truthfully and loudly if necessary. Currently, American society continues to brainstorm methods to include and empower Black male expression, while simultaneously resisting to acknowledge Black male's society-induced rage. Too often in the past, Black men who dared to speak their experience and give voice to their rage were silenced or socially shut out of society. When Black men gain the courage to speak out, lead and, become social and political visionaries, whether it be in the classroom on the pulpit or on the freedom trail, their voices are often permanently silenced. Such has been the case with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, the social ostracizing of Minister Louis Farrakhan, and the pushing out of countless young boys within the K-12 educational system. According to hooks (2004),

Almost all black men at some point has had to repress his feelings, thoughts, and emotions for fear of being labeled the troublemaker or being punished for supposedly making trouble. Too often socially and intellectually curious black boys are labeled as troublemakers while their white peers are rewarded for the same behavior. (p. xii)

This is important to note, as not all labeling of Black men as social and moral disturbers is true. But much of the rage and acts of violence that is present comes as a result of social frustration, low self-concept, and internalized acceptance of social labels. As Martin Luther King Jr. asserted, "The job of arousing manhood within a people that have been taught for so many centuries that they are

nobody is not easy" (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 736). It is often the case that if you are called something enough times, you begin to believe what you hear. And so does the larger society. With the majority of America believing the negative stereotypes about Black men, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to find a labor structure that is willing to provide them with opportunity (Boyd & Allen, 1995). This makes participation in the world of criminality a strong and often tempting option for Black men.

> With the mass exodus of Black working and middle class families from the ghetto, the inner city's severe unemployment and joblessness became even more magnified. . . . Such class changes have depleted communities of service establishments, local business, and stores that could remain profitable enough to provide full-time employment so that persons could support families, or even to offer youths part-time employment in order to develop crucial habits of responsibility and work. Furthermore, ghetto residents are removed from job networks that operate in more affluent neighborhoods. Thus, they are deprived of the informal contacts with employers that result in finding decent jobs. All of these factors create a medium for the development of criminal behavior by black men in order to survive, ranging from fencing stolen goods to petty thievery to drug dealing. For many black families, the illegal activity of young black men provides their only income. (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 163)

Edelman (1986) suggests that communities must come together to provide two primary criteria that is needed to better engage Black men in society: education and job skills. Without proper education and increased job skills, Black men remain an unemployable class and thus continue to fall victim to the consequences of economic deprivation, including an inability to help take care of their families and children; frustration with society, which results in feelings of rage; and a sense of hopelessness that makes criminality seem the only viable option. However, the American power structure is once again brought into the fold, as attempts are futile if communities come together to better prepare this population. But the larger society does not create public policy initiatives that provide firm and lasting support and opportunity.

THE EDUCATIONAL ARENA

Misses, what for me learn to read? Me have no prospect! (Schneider & Schneider, 2001, p. 22)

—Israel, a slave responding to his Master's wife when asked why he never tried to learn

African American men are not being adequately served in the classrooms of our nation. One of the primary proofs of this is the gain in literacy among Black men. According to the U.S. Census of 1900, 57% of Black males were illiterate. One hundred years later, the literacy rate among Black men persists at a high level of 44%. It has taken the nation 100 years to increase the literacy rate by only 13%. The reasons for the lack of cohesion between Black male youth and the public school system are many and varied. With regard to the student, he brings with him to the classroom the above mentioned history and social ills: a history of oppression that has effected his family unit, a life of poverty or some form of economic struggle, a community of criminality and violence or some form of racial frustration, a generation of enraged and inadequately educated parents and elders, and the beginnings of deep psychological and esteem issues that take root with his first engagement in society (preschool, cartoons, etc.). Or as Kevin Powell (1992) said, he has often been eaten up by the ghetto before he can "master the art of survival" (p. 36), much less gain the basic skills needed to start one's educational career.

Thus, the Black male student often starts out as a disadvantaged one. And where the school experience could serve to turn the situation around for him or, at the least, offer an alternative nurturing and encouraging environment that counters his lived experience, it often fails to do so. Because of an internalized belief in racial stereotypes and the influence of the social label of Black man as villain, many teachers, White and Black, hesitate to engage and interact in a close and nurturing way with Black boys and often fail to provide them with superior educational service (Noguera, 1997). As hooks (2004) asserts, "Even before black boys encounter a genocidal street culture, they have been assaulted by the cultural

genocide taking place in early childhood educational institutions where they are simply not taught" (p. 39). Garibaldi's (1992) New Orleans data supports this as 40% of the Black male students felt that their teachers did not set high enough goals for them, and 60% desired for their teachers to push them harder. Despite all of the negative life experiences that Black boys may encounter, many do want to learn and seek relevant and realistic alternatives to the negative options confronting them daily. A strong interest in education has always existed among African Americans, particularly Black men.

The creation of Negro schools during the postslavery years was often a community commitment. In many cases, the black communities supported in spirit and in funds the creation of schools in their community whenever an educator was available. Booker T. Washington, in his legendary text, *Up From Slavery*, recounted how the community would engage in the practice of boarding round—that is, each family in the neighborhood would agree to board the school teacher for a few weeks to keep an educated person in the community and the school open (Boyd & Allen, 1995). According to Washington, it was a whole race trying to go to school, whether it be day or night schools, or 50- or 75-year-olds, all sought to attend school with the goal of being able to read the bible before they died. Education was viewed as the means for upward mobility, and Black men often led the inroads to creating educational opportunity for the African American race. However, school desegregation proved to be more complex than merely passing and implementing the law:

The racial integration of schools provided black students with the access to the educational resources provided in white schools, when school districts actually implemented the law. However, even in these situations, the prejudiced and stereotypical beliefs of white teachers negatively impacted the learning and development of black students, particularly black males. (hooks, 2001)

Even the most well-intentioned White teachers may have lacked the social experience with the black community to effectively reach and engage Black students. McCall (1994) relates his experience:

> It wasn't much better dealing with white teachers. They avoided eye
> contact with me as much as possible . . . it was too much for an
> eleven year old to challenge and I didn't try. Instead, I tried to
> become invisible. I kept to myself, remained quiet during class dis-
> cussions, and never asked questions in or after class. . . . I staggered
> numb and withdrawn through each school day. (p. 19)

With integration came the Black flight into White suburbia and the
busing of Black students to schools outside of their home commu-
nity. The result was that teachers no longer lived in the communi-
ties with their students and the students' parents. This created a
deep disconnect between teachers, parents, and students.

According to the statistics listed earlier, the school environment
has changed little since McCall's (1994) experience in the late
1960s. America largely continues to live a segregated life, and thus
it is vital to incorporate more direct cultural learning, interaction,
and exposure to Black male youth for undergraduate education
majors and cultural and diversity sensitivity training to veteran
teachers. The marginalization that boys experience in the class-
room, when compounded with the intense social issues that they
are facing, makes the educational arena yet another system that
fails to understand and adequately serve young Black men.

ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS OF INTELLECTUAL INCLUSION:
HIP HOP CULTURE

> Invisible man got the whole world watching. . . . I'm getting big
> props from this thing called hip hop. (Track 2)
>
> —Mos Def (Smith, 2002a)

The creation of hip hop culture has served as one of the more
recent and stronger alternative systems of inclusion created by and
for the group. African American men now and have historically
sought to learn, speak, and process their experience in environ-
ments that are accepting and about relevant issues, thus the entrée
of hip hop. With a roughly 20-year history of involving often
poorly educated Black men in the entertainment and arts arena, hip

hop has served as a system of inclusion for Black male intellectual thought and growth. At the same time that Black males were being silenced and marginalized in the classroom, they began to create an alternate cultural structure that welcomed their social and political commentary, reflections on their lived experience, and expressions of rage against the power structures of America. Hamilton (2004) notes, "One of the reasons that hip hop is such a vital mode of African American cultural expression is its immediacy and its insistence on lived experience" (p. 35). Within the cultural structure of hip hop exists many of the factors that seem to be absent in the educational arena for Black males: freedom of thought, inclusion, competitiveness, encouragement, and immediate reward, all taking place in a nontraditional yet intellectually stimulating environment.

I first thought to closely examine hip hop as an intellectual form of inclusion after viewing two television programs. The first was the *MTV Diary* (Production 920, 2003) of rappers Redman and Methodman, which followed the two men as they toured the country. What was most striking about the show was that Redman, who, if placed in a classroom environment, would probably be labeled *class clown* or a disruptive student, challenged his musical partner to a competition to determine who could write the most rhymes in the month they were to be on tour. He then proceeded to take out his pen and pad and write. The visual image of this relatively loud and often comical man being quiet and writing was striking as it illustrated the potentiality of reflective thought, literary skill, and artistic creativity that exists among African American men. The other program, *Driven* (Production 920, 2003) was aired on VH1 and tells the story of the group, OutKast, and their journey to success. Even the name of this group speaks volumes to their role in verbalizing the lived experience of African Americans, and particularly African American men. The documentary was, for the most part, filled with young Black men, all involved in the world of hip hop in some form. Similar to gang culture, this cultural structure offered a sense of inclusion, acceptance, and group membership, but differed dramatically as it required thought and literary expression. The men of hip hop are not selling drugs; they are selling words and

doing it using the very literary skills that are not normally associated with high school dropouts—prose, metaphor, simile, personification, and imagery. The culture of hip hop, then, seems to offer not only inclusion, but also the opportunity for intellectual growth. Rapper Tupac Shakur served as a strong example. A high school dropout, he has been acclaimed as one of the smartest lyricists within the hip hop arena. He was a consumer of books and an investor in self-acquired knowledge. However, he was a strong critic of the American educational system:

> I think that we got so caught up in school being a tradition that we stopped using it as a learning tool, which it should be. I'm learning about the basics, but they're not basic for me. To get us ready for today's world, [the present curriculum] is not helping. (Shakur cited in Dyson, 2001, p. 76)

As hip hop scholar Michael Eric Dyson (2001) notes, "It is clear that Tupac believes schools should address the pressing social issues of the day, and even more specifically, they should help youth confront the ills that directly affect them" (p. 77).

Hip hop has become the present day cultural environment that encourages Black men to write, think, and speak. Dr. Scott Heath notes, "If you listen to rappers, it's always about where they were, what they did, that they will never leave" (Hamilton, 2004, p. 37). And listening to hip hop may offer a deeper understanding of the lived experience and social perspective of the Black male. The lyrics of songs such as Tupac Shakur's "Changes" (Shakur, Evans, & Hornsby, 1998), Nas's "I Want to Talk to You" (Jones, 1999), and Mos Def's (Smith & Martin, 2002) "Mathematics" each summarize in less than 5 minutes and in a poetic form many of the key aspects that researchers have come to align with the Black male experience—poor health, drug trafficking, social oppression, violence, social and political rage, depression, prison industry complex, enslavement, unemployment, poverty, and the need for self-love. Even the titles of some songs serve as strong examples of African American male expression: "Elevators" by OutKast (Benjamin & Paxton, 1996) speaks to the desire for communal upward mobility, "Mr. Nigga" by Mos Def (Smith, 2002b) speaks

to the society's stereotypical view of Black men, and "Brown Skin Lady" by Black Star (Mos Def & Kweli, 2002) speaks to the psychologically damaging images of beauty internalized by Black women and men.

Hip hop, as an alternative male structural system, has welcomed the rage and embraced the strongly negative critiques of the American power structure by Black men. Where black men have been silenced and severely penalized in the classroom for their modes of expression, they have been provided a microphone and immensely rewarded in the hip hop arena. This cultural structure has been one of the few spaces in which Black men can truthfully tell their own story in their own voice. Heath notes that it is this truthful aspect of cultural expression that makes hip hop an important arena for educational scholars to explore:

> I believe that makes hip hop an area where we might see theory and practice coming together inside African American intellectualism, where we might see an attempt to develop innovative approaches to using hip hop as a method for organizing African American youth around issues that are important for their survival. (Hamilton, 2004, p. 37)

The in-depth study of the aspects and structural components of hip hop culture that have been so strongly appealing and deeply engaging to Black men might offer even greater insight than the mere use of existing music as a method to reach youth. Though hip hop as an industry is not without its political ills, community failures, and commodity pressures, undoubtedly, the appeal of hip hop as a form of popular culture warrants the educational arena studying and extracting its critical components of engagement, which seem to include offering a sense of autonomy; encouraging deep and conscious reflection, even if this includes the verbal communication of rage; accepting criticisms of power structures, even if this includes the school systems, political constituencies, and communities in which Black men are involved; setting high expectations; developing a sense of competitiveness to encourage and drive Black males; educating in nontraditional environments; and including experiences external to school within educational curric-

ula. But what is probably the most important component of hip hop culture is the act of listening to young Black males. The strongest and most positive aspect of hip hop is that it gives the emcee the impression that his words are important and will be listened to. As we struggle to adequately serve Black men, listening to them might serve as a vital first step.

IMPLICATIONS, SOLUTIONS, AND INTERVENTIONS

> The conditions our people suffer are extreme and an extreme illness cannot be cured with moderate medicine.
>
> —Malcolm X (1970)

Changing the current status of African American men in American society will require much more than a few intervention programs, special education courses, and teacher training. This is an issue that began hundreds of years ago and was compounded by hundreds of years of intentional and consistent oppression that is tied to larger American power structures and extends beyond the educational community to the political, economic, criminal justice, and multimedia arenas.

As Malcolm X (1970) notes, it is an extreme illness which will require extreme medicine. Some scholars have argued that true change will require a complete restructuring of power structures in America. Julius Lester asserts the following:

> It is clear that America as it now exists must be destroyed . . . America has rhetoric of freedom and the reality of slavery. It talks peace, while dropping bombs. It speaks of self determination for all people, while moving to control the means of production on which self determination depends . . . white power creates one basic condition under which all who are powerless must live. It makes us sharecroppers. We work at jobs we care nothing about so that we can buy food, pay the rent and buy clothes. We're paid enough so that we can stay alive and work and make money for somebody else. That's life in America. (Boyd & Allen, 1995, p. 328)

Additionally, bell hooks (2004) notes,

Imperialist white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy is an interrelated system of domination that will never fully empower black men. Right now that system is symbolically lynching masses of black men, choking off their very life, by making it all but impossible for them to learn basic reading and writing skills in childhood; by the promotion of addiction as the free enterprise system that works to provide unprecedented wealth to a few and short term solace from collective pain for many; by widespread unemployment; and the continued psychological lure of life threatening patriarchal masculine behaviors. (p. xiii)

Black men themselves have echoed this sentiment through the actions of creating alternative cultural structures from gangs to hip hop. Even noted integrationist and advocate of peaceful negotiation Martin Luther King Jr. called for a destruction and rebirth of the American power structure as it stood. A pastor at heart, King referred to a Christian biblical story in which one asks Jesus how he might be in his favor, and rather than listing all of the various ways the man should change, he remarks that the man must be born again, meaning that a complete destruction of the old self and building of a new self must occur. King goes on to argue that this is what must occur in America (Boyd & Allen, 1995). The question, then, becomes how might such a drastic change occur for a group that still remains villainized by the larger society. Critical to the formation of solutions is the role of power. Because, for the most part, black men lack real and substantial economic, political, and social power, major public interventions are required to largely come from White power structures in the larger society. According to Roach (2003), for a real investment to be made from society at large, Black men must be seen as a vital asset to society and tied to the growth of local economies and social order. Slavery may have been the last time Black men were strongly tied to the economic growth of America and thus "needed" in American society. And if even when Black men were directly linked to the economic growth of American society, they were still ill treated, it might be unrealistic to expect the current society in its current state to take seriously the plight of Black men, much less be willing to undergo a structural change to improve their situation. Community solutions may

provide the most realistic inroads and a commitment to implementing, at the least, major structural changes within the American educational system. Most important, the community initiatives and programs must compliment the changes in education. As Blake and Darling (1994) note, vast improvements in education may prove futile if society does not offer employment opportunities to compliment these initiatives. William Strickland (Boyd & Allen, 1995) provides the following suggestions for community solutions: Communicate through town halls, churches, in the streets like the street preachers used to do in Harlem; hold government accountable for creating community development programs and helping to sustain existing ones; support programs that work by giving to current successful programs so that they can grow and expand; create new programs through the establishment of more mobile libraries, film, and music programs; be political by creating more political education programs within the Black community. I add to this list the need for more mental and substance abuse centers within the community to offer basic and creative counseling skills through interactive and nontraditional counseling interventions.

Garibaldi (1992) provides important suggestions for educational practice:

1. African American male students should be taught values, etiquette, and morality in school. They should also be taught why school success is important.
2. African American male students should be strongly encouraged to participate in more extracurricular activities that are related to academics and leadership.
3. African American male college students should have a stronger and more active presence in local schools as teacher aides, speakers, tutors, mentors, and workshop facilitators. Various segments of the community such as the media, businesspersons, religious leaders, public servants, senior citizens, retired professionals, skilled craftsmen, and members of civic organizations should be actively recruited to serve as school volunteers.
4. Teachers should encourage African American students at an early level to pursue a college or postsecondary education, and more African American male teachers should be hired.

5. Businesses should provide rewards and incentives, such as sum-
   mer apprenticeships or book awards, to the children of their
   employees.
6. Teachers should demonstrate the relevance of coursework to the
   adult years by incorporating family-living skills, budgeting, and
   business and job-related communication and writing skills into
   the current curriculum of relevant courses.

There are only a few suggestions listed above, but what is important
is the extent and level of change that each suggestion encompasses.
From recruiting practices, community involvement, and university
partnerships to the type of subject matter taught, these changes are
vast. It is also important to note that new extracurricular experi-
ences that provide a safe and relevant space for Black boys to voice
their thoughts should also be created. This new educational space
might seek to mirror the environment of cultural inclusion present
in the world of hip hop. Additionally, space needs to be created for
Black men to better understand their current situation and how they
came to be positioned there. As evidenced by hip hop culture, an
environment that allows for the processing of one's history, reflect-
ing on one's current situation, and establishing goals for the future
can exist.

A structural change must occur within education. Garibaldi's
(1992) suggestions and the insights that might come from the study
of hip hop must be used to change how the educational arena
approaches the art of teaching. In addition to creating new educa-
tional experiences for Black males, existing curriculum, pedagogy,
and supplemental experiences should also be restructured to
become more inclusive. Additionally, increased practical experi-
ence for undergraduate education majors is needed to ensure that
new teachers are prepared to relate to young Black boys. Both stu-
dents and teachers should be provided with increased training on
social and cultural issues affecting Black boys. Students should be
provided with greater cultural immersion experiences that might
deepen their connection to their ancestry and history. Extracurricu-
lar experiences might also be developed that outreach to parents to
not only get them interested in their student's learning but also to

get them involved in activities that will advance their own knowledge and job skills. An attempt to recreate the community school environments noted by Booker T. Washington (cited in Boyd & Allen, 1995) may assist in changing the educational reality of the entire Black family. Finally, greater efforts should be made to embrace the rage and offer opportunities for reflection. All of these suggestions from community interventions to systemic transformation within education to the use of hip hop culture as a model of inclusion can be merged and used to inform one another. It must be determined how educational transformation, community activism, and popular culture structures can collaborate for the betterment of this population. If this does not occur, the dismal sense of hope that Black men currently have in American society to truly transform how it perceives and interacts with them will remain a reality. This hopelessness was best expressed by Mos Def (2002c) in the song "Mr. Nigga" when he expresses that he will make every effort to engage and to enjoy life, to achieve what others label the *American Dream*. But even when he reaches his goals, even if he achieves his dreams, he will not be surprised if he is still seen as "Mr. Nigger" despite all of his achievements.

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