Never Quit: The Complexities of Promoting Social and Academic Excellence at a Single-Gender School for Urban American American Males

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This study explores the experiences of urban African American males at a first year single-gender charter school in the Southern region of the United States. The present case study was based on interviews and focus groups with parents, teachers, students, and the school administrator, and a participant observation of Excel Academy [pseudonym]. The findings of this study suggest that there were four critical instructional complexities that emerged: expectations dissonance, disguised engagement, differential engagement, and expectations overload. Remarkably, these issues were being addressed by a school value created by students and institutionalized by teachers--To Never Quit. Recommendations to address each instructional complexity are explored.

Introduction

Through history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness…
(W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903)

In the preceding passage from the *Souls of Black Folk,* the renowned African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) questioned the tendency to view African Americans as a naturally "weak" race, lacking the power to resist and transform their reality. Considered beset by both natural and cultural imperfections, African Americans were

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labeled as unfit for full membership in a progressive society (Aguirre & Turner, 2004; Mckee, 1993). Another thought by Du Bois (1903) provides additional insights:

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it…, How does it feel to be a problem? (p. 1).

African Americans were marked as a unique American problem, and subsequent attempts to integrate them into society were informed by this *problem-centered* perspective (Myrdal, 1944). As a result, African Americans were granted equality under the law, but were still viewed and treated as unfit citizens (Aguirre & Turner, 2004). Currently, this contradiction is perhaps most apparent within the U.S. public educational system, in which African American's civil rights have yet to materialize into a system of high quality education (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008). The total failure of the American education system, particularly for African American males, is best illustrated in the following finding. The average African American male has performed below basic in every grade level and every subject on the National Assessment of Education Progress for at least the past 20 years (NEAP, 1990-2010).

Well over a century ago, Du Bois critiqued efforts denying African Americans equal access to high quality education that rested upon a jaded praxis, referred to here as *problem-centered education*. Today, this complex system of educational philosophies and practices can be characterized by six themes:

(1) Philosophies supporting the notion that African American children, communities, and cultures are inherently pathological (Feagin, 2006; Mckee, 1993);
(2) Examining African American educational experiences through Eurocentric standards, philosophies, concepts, theories, and research methodologies
(Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000);
(3) Crafting educational policies, interventions, educator and leadership preparation programs, and other measures designed to promote African American student achievement through these pathological and Eurocentric frameworks (Lewis et al., 2008);
(4) The educational practice of labeling African American students as "at risk," and African American communities and cultures as the risk factors that must be circumvented in order to achieve academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978; Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003);
(5) Creating school cultures characterized by low teacher expectations, a low sense of responsibility for student learning, and a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy (Anyon, 1997; James & Lewis, 2009; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006*);
(6) The practice of dismissing the professional responsibility of educators and the greater society for creating and sustaining educational disparities, while "blaming the victims" of educational discrimination (Ford, 1996; Lewis et al, 2008).

The present work began by critiquing the "risk" tradition in educational resiliency research through a critical race lens. As a part of this critique, the researcher advanced some

guiding principles for *power-centered* research into the educational experiences of urban African American males. Second, this research developed the concept of *excellence* as it emerged from a case study of Excel Academy for Boys [pseudonym]. Third, the present study detailed four instructional complexities encountered at Excel Academy in their pursuit of social and academic excellence. Fourth, examples are detailed from teachers and students of how *imara* (Swahili for, to persevere) advanced their efforts to pursue social and academic excellence. Finally, recommendations are offered to address each of the four complexities that emerged at Excel Academy for Boys.

<center>**Resilience Theory and the "Risk" Tradition**</center>

Arguably, many schools of educational resilience research are prime examples of *problem-centered education,* while others have proven valuable. Over the last four decades, numerous studies and educational interventions have been created using resiliency models attempting to improve the educational outcomes of "at risk" populations, yet these efforts as a whole have not resulted in positive systemic change in the educational system, particularly for urban African American males (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). If this research tradition is to contribute to positive systemic change in the educational system, it must be separated from its *problem-centered educational* traditions.

Overview of Resilience Theory

A plethora of studies based on the concept of resiliency have sought to understand the personal, social, and environmental factors associated with children and adolescents overcoming family violence (Straus, 1983); mental illness (Goldstein, 1990); stress and family dysfunction (Rutter, 1979); as well as poverty and drug abuse (Garmezy & Masten, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1977, 1992). Resiliency within this context is seen as an individual phenomenon, a positive adaptation to adverse life circumstances (Howard & Johnson, 2000; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1990). Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2003) note that "resiliency generally refers to those factors and processes that limit negative behaviors associated with stress and result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of adversity" (p. 2). Various researchers (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Masten, 1994; Masten et al., 1990) note that there are at least three major strands of resiliency research: (1) studies of exemplars from "at-risk" populations; (2) studies of how "normality" is achieved and maintained despite stressful life circumstances; and (3) the ability to bounce back from traumatic occurrences. This first form of resiliency research is most germane to this study, because educational resilience studies emerged from this tradition.

Educational Resilience

Inquiries addressing educational resilience typically focus on exemplars from "at-risk" populations, yet definitions of educational resiliency are diverse. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) define educational resilience as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (p. 46). Also, Henderson and Milstein (1996) developed a widely cited definition of resiliency:

> The capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to severe stress or simply to the stress that is inherent in today's world (p.7).

Yet, after forty years of research, a uniform or widely accepted definition or model for resiliency has not been established.

Additionally, researchers have identified any number of personal values, behaviors and attitudes common among resilient students, and less frequent among populations labeled as "at-risk" (Gordon & Song, 1994; Palmer; 1997). A quality example is Peng, Lee, Wang, and Walberg (1992) study of 17,000 low-income tenth grade students from urban communities. In this study, the researchers compared the attributes of students who were labeled as resilient and non-resilient. Among other things, they concluded that their sample shared many of the traditionally identified personal attributes of resilient children, but intrinsic motivation and an internal locus of control seemed to best predict academic success among urban students. Additionally, Alva (1991) noted that the personality traits of educationally resilient students are "high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school" (p.19). Gordon and Song (1994) also contributed ten personal attributes of resilient children including: (1) positive self concept, (2) drive, (3) cognitive style, (4) temperament, (5) motivation identity, (6) knowledge of dominant culture values, (7) health and nutrition, (8) social competence, (9) life-course organization, and (10) autonomy (p. 33).

African Americans and Educational Resiliency Research

These models and many others have informed a scarce but growing body of scholarly literature in the area of educational resilience studies that are specifically focused on African American males from urban settings. For instance, Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, and Royster (1991) conducted a quantitative analysis of college attainment among African American males, and asserted that students' educational plans and the influence of their fathers contributed to academic resilience to a greater degree than family economy status. Their study was able to quantify the impact of diverse variables on the retention of African American males, yet the lack of qualitative data made it impossible in this study to ascertain how or why variables had an impact on retention.

More recently, Gayles' (2005) qualitative study of three academically successful African American male high school seniors concluded that the practical value of education motivated the participants to achieve. In other words, these young males gained the perspective that a quality education could create economic and employment opportunities for them. Also, Hawkins and Mulkey's (2005) longitudinal study of middle school African American youth linked participation in sports with higher aspirations to study a college preparatory curriculum, to finish high school, and attend college. Finally, Hall's (2007) research filled a gap in resiliency research on African American and Latino males by exploring how urban males defined their own realities and resistance through poetry and hip hop rhymes.

These studies are representative of the latest wave of scholarly educational resiliency research that attempts to address the unique educational experiences of African American males in urban American society. More importantly, they advance the study of educational resilience

by focusing specifically on the strengths and not the "risks" of academically successful African American males. Yet, even these studies rely on a concept of resiliency that view urban communities as sites of pathologies that compromise the potential of African American males. Many of these studies could benefit from a more complex conceptualization of resiliency common among ecological resiliency theorists, who conceptualize resiliency as emanating from interactions between individuals, communities and schools (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Lerner & Benson, 2003; Luthar, 2003; Rutter, 2005). The next section will offer a critique of the "risk" tradition in this line of inquiry, because it has provided the theoretical foundation for resiliency research (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003).

Critical Race Theory: Critique of Resiliency

The goal of this section is to craft a critique informed by critical race theory (CRT) that can dismiss the currently acceptable notion of "risk" in educational resilience research, particularly as it relates to African American urban males. To that end, I will first review key dimensions of CRT, then critique the use of "risk" in resiliency theory utilizing selected themes from CRT.

During the 1990's, Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education emerged as scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) applied its critical legal framework to explore educational inequalities. This epistemology and methodology was conceptualized to expose the harmful effects of racism in all levels of education, while seeking social justice and positive social change for students. DeCuir & Dixson (2004) and Lynn & Parker (2006) reviewed the historical development of CRT, its major aims, and how educational researchers can more effectively employ CRT. Their synthesis provided a concise and accessible five dimension model of CRT based on the works of foundational CRT scholars. These tenets are: (1) counterstorytelling (Matsuda, 1987); (2) the permanence of racism (Bell, 1980, 1992,1995; Lawrence, 1992); (3) Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993); (4) interest convergence (Bell, 1988); and (5) the critique of liberalism (Bell, 1988; Thomas,1995; Crenshaw, 1988; Matsuda, 1987).

Critical Race Critique

This critique is an application of the CRT theme "the permanence of race" synthesized by DeCuir and Dixson (2004) but articulated by Bell (1992) and Lawrence (1992). These researchers conceived that racial advantage and disadvantage are foundational principles in American society. It is therefore advantageous to explore resiliency among African American males in urban schools within a framework that is responsive to their historical, political, economic and social realities. Studies based upon "at risk" categorizations fail to meet this standard, thus lack the authenticity to speak to the African American male experience.

Additionally, Howard, Dryden, and Johnson (1999) identified four fallacies related to the use of "risk" in resiliency research: (1) researchers have consistently found that the majority of children or adolescents labeled as "at risk" mature to be healthy and productive adults, which calls into question the usefulness of the "at risk" label; (2) educators often mislabel children as "at risk" because of disruptive behaviors in schools; (3) "risk" based resiliency models tend to be grounded in *problem-based education* that essentially blame the academic shortcomings of students on their families, communities and/or cultures, while ignoring the structural equalities

that compromises the effectiveness of American education (Kozol, 2005); and (4) the "at-risk" label is most often given to student populations who are viewed as culturally, socially, and economically different from the dominant Eurocentric school culture (Goodlan & Keating, 1990; Fleming, Mullen, & Bammer, 1997; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1977, 1992). Supportively, Waxman and Huang (1996) concluded that the process of "at-risk" labeling has resulted in urban racial minority students being placed in "at-risk" categories at higher rates than any other group of students.

More disturbing is that Brown, D'Emidio-Caston, & Benard (2001) critiqued placing "at-risk" labels on children because students are typically given this label prior to measurable evidence of academic failure. In fact, many of the resiliency factors identified by researchers and teachers are behaviors and attitudes that allow for the child to be easily managed in the classroom (Waxman et al., 2003). In this context, being "at-risk" has much to do with likeability and controllability rather than academic ability or potential.

Until recent cross-national resiliency research by various scholars (Ungar, 2005, Ungar & Liebenberg, 2005, Ungar, 2007; Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Othman, Kwong, Armstrong, & Gilgun, 2007), the significance of national culture to the phenomena of resiliency was under-theorized. The lack of this theoretical lens among resiliency researchers has led to over three decades of de-contextualized resiliency research. Consequently, urban communities and students of color have been labeled as "at-risk" despite research detailing the vast funding and teacher quality equities along racial and economic lines inherent in American education (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008). In short, "at risk" labels are often assigned not because of measurable academic shortcomings, but due to cultural, social, and economic differences between educators and diverse student populations (Goodlan & Keating, 1990; Fleming, Mullen & Bammer, 1997; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1977). Much of resilience research frames academic underperformance as a byproduct of internal cultural or community factors and not racial inequalities (Bonilla, 2003; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997).

A further application of CRT yields additional critiques of educational resiliency research with specific concerns for its impact on urban African American males. First, in resiliency research, the behaviors, values and cultures of White children and communities are positioned as the normative standard against which all other cultures and communities are judged (Boyden & Mann, 2005). In this context, the resilient African American male is described as someone who can assimilate White middle class values. Extolling African American males to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" represents a part of the solution, but in isolation it ignores research indicating that highly successful middle class African Americans still face racial discrimination in their everyday lives (Feagin & Feagin, 2003).

Additionally, success is also normative in educational studies of resilience; resulting in urban students with high class ranks, higher than average scores on standardized tests, a high school diploma, or 90 or more credits in college being considered resilient in many resiliency studies. These signs of "success" are projected from mainstream society onto racial minorities who lack the same resources and social capital as members of mainstream America. It is therefore shortsighted to expect racial minority students' journeys to "success" or "measures of success" to follow similar paths as middle class White Americans (Ungar, 2007).

Finally, the creation and application of generalizable resiliency models makes success possible for any student through the psychological benefits of protective factors, and by assimilating socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors (Henderson & Mistein, 1996). This *one*

resiliency saves all approach is not responsive to the situated realities (i.e., historical, political, economic, and social) of African American male students. More importantly, these general models have not produced, nor are they capable of creating, systemic educational reform due to their lack of cultural authenticity.

Power-centered Research

Given this critique, it is plausible to suggest that a new direction in studying "success" among urban African American males is warranted. The present research is based upon the view that African American males can demonstrate *imara* or power in their efforts to overcome the social forces that oppose their matriculation in education. *Power-centered research* addresses the shortcomings of resilience inquiries and can be characterized by the following themes:
1) Analytical lenses that are responsive to situated realities, and that acknowledges the uniqueness of social locations such as an urban African American male;
2) Concepts, models, research, theories, and interventions must not place normative cultural values, success markers or success pathways as the standard against which the schooling experiences' of diverse student populations are judged;
3) The use of terms and categories such as "at risk," "placed at risk," or "disadvantaged" must be eliminated to avoid theorizing that urban communities are the key source of academic shortcomings among urban African American males;
4) Power centered research into academic success must entertain how the racialized nature of American society jeopardizes the futures of urban African American males;
5) Concepts, models, research, theories and interventions must possess harmony between underline philosophies, recommended policies, and school/classroom level practices and procedures. It is therefore, unacceptable to conduct research or create a program seeking to improve urban male outcomes based upon deficit thinking, or Eurocentric philosophies;
6) Success must be reconceptualized as a contested reality for African American males, not as given outcome resulting solely from individual effort. Such research must inform how urban African American males can matriculate in a society that resists their advancement. This requires more than a slippery notion of success, rather academic and social excellence among urban African American males must be understood and promoted by research.

Relation to Current Study

The ambitious goal of the previous review and critique was to provide an intellectual basis for the present study on excellence among urban African American males. Second, this critique articulated some of the critical shortcomings of traditional resiliency models, particularly problems related to the use of "risk" labels directed at racial minority learners. The final aim of the critique was to articulate the tenants of *power-centered* research designed to understand excellence among urban African American males. Moreover, this study seeks to apply several of the themes from this critique by creating new concepts and frameworks to understanding the educational experiences of urban African American males. The upcoming sections will detail

the methodology and findings of a case study on Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym), a single-gender charter school designed to meet the unique needs of urban African American middle school males.

Methodology

Research Questions

I began this project with one general guiding question because I did not want to presume that I knew what questions needed to be asked beforehand. My research questions materialized after a number of visits to Excel Academy, and were refined several times as the project unfolded. The research questions were as follows:

1) How was social and academic excellence promoted among African American male students?
2) What complexities arouse as Excel Academy sought to promote social and academic excellence among its African American male students?
3) How did the students and educators of Excel Academy respond to these complexities?

The School

Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym) opened in the summer of 2007 to serve 5th graders in a large urban city in the Southwestern part of the United States. Excel was opened to provide an alternative for local parents in a school district that was close to State takeover because of their longstanding academic and financial struggles. Excel is located in a converted shopping center with plans to renovate the entire mall in the coming years as new grades are added. Excel is not designed like the typical school; rather, its entrance and administrative spaces reminded me of a family room in a home. The school was nicely decorated with couches, pictures, plants, and inspirational quotes displayed on the walls throughout the school. Approaching the glass front of the school from the parking lot allowed me to see the mission, vision, and school values that are painted on the wall.

The main corridor led to all of the classrooms, the lunch room and the computer lab. The walls of this corridor were decorated from eye-level to the ceiling with students' science projects, essays from English class, and other high scoring exams. Two of the walls near the rear of the corridor were covered with jerseys and information from seven different universities. Each classroom was arranged so that three or four students could work together. The English classroom had a collection of books from diverse authors (most of which were African Americans) on a desk as student entered the room. Students had to select one book each day to read to themselves at the beginning of the class. The social studies class had the names and pictures of African American leaders and their contributions to American society. The School Leader's office was mostly used for storage or for conferences with parents and students. He also had a desk located at the front door of the school. Often times, he sat on the desk and greeted parents as they picked their sons up after school.

The Students

Excel Academy serves 79 students, and 48% of students failed the reading, math or writing portion of the State standardized test the year before coming to Excel Academy. Additionally, 36% of the students were retained in the 5th grade from last year, and 80% qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch program.

In September of 2007, each student was given the Stanford Achievement Test 10th edition as a baseline assessment of their math, reading, and science readiness. The Stanford school summary indicated that on average, students enrolled in Excel were outscored by 79% of 5th graders in Math, Sciences and Reading nationally. Additionally, the assessment revealed that this first cohort of students displayed the reading and mathematical competencies of the average 3rd grader, and in science the average 2nd grader. But after their first year, Excel students surpassed State averages on Reading and Math for African American students.

Methods

The present inquiry is a qualitative case study detailing the inner workings of the school. This methodology and research method was an appropriate choice given my desire to use multiple methods to gather data, the need to understand the school culture of Excel Academy within its lived context, and my desire to explore the underline processes at work in the education of urban African American males (Yin, 2002). This case study featured in-depth interviews and focus groups with students, teachers and parents, and several participant observations of the classes and other daily routines (faculty meetings, parent conferences, small group reading, hiring process, parent orientation, etc.) of Excel Academy. These various methodologies, along with *prolonged engagement* at this school and *member checking* after interviews, focus groups and classroom observations, helped to approach *triangulation* in this study and to ensure that the voices of various participants were honored (Denzin & Lincoln; 2005; Duncan, 2002; 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lynn, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002; Winndance-Twine & Warren). The findings will explore how Excel sought to promote academic and social excellence and will detail the four instructional complexities that emerged as teachers and the school leader sought to meet the social and academic needs of their students.

Findings

Through this research, I was moved to push beyond the currently accepted categories, theories and frameworks in resiliency research. In doing so, I sought new ways to understand and describe the complexities associated with educating urban African American males. These findings represent authentic descriptions and interpretations of educational experiences that are free from *problem-centered* frameworks. The findings section began with insights from parents, students, teachers, and the school administrator that detailed their perceptions on the complexities of social and academic excellence among African American males. This will be followed by a discussion of four instructional complexities related to educating African American males at Excel Academy.

Promoting Excellence

This section explores the complexities of promoting social and academic excellence among students attending Excel Academy. The concept of *excellence* rather than success provided a more accurate description of the goals that parents, teachers, and the school administrator shared for the young men at Excel Academy. The need for this distinction emerged over the course of fieldwork during which I observed an equal focus on both social and academic maturation. So, simply doing well on State-issued standardized tests was not the ultimate marker of success at Excel.

Instead, the school's mission statement and vision called for: (1) the development of both social and academic competencies; (2) every student will be prepared to enter the college of their choice in the year 2015; and (3) upon completing college, students should return to Excel Academy to serve future students. In this light, e*xcellence* can be described as an on-going developmental process concerned with instilling key academic and social skills into African American males that are critical to their matriculation in a society that resists their achievement. Unlike common conceptualizations of success, excellence is a process of continual growth, not a state that can be achieved. The next two subsections detail how Excel Academy perused both social and academic excellence.

Social excellence. One of the ongoing challenges facing Excel's School Leader, Mr. Goodson (pseudonym), was creating a supportive and safe school environment that promotes the social maturation of students, while enhancing the academic mission of Excel Academy. As a result, Excel Academy is a discipline-centered school, in which violations are confronted with immediate (verbal warnings) and delayed but certain consequences (loss of privileges). Thus far, this has created a school that parents and students perceive to be free of bullying and fighting, which was a common concern for them at their former schools. Fighting, however, was a concern in the beginning of the year at Excel Academy as students struggled to interact with one another without resorting to physical confrontations.

In response, every student was sent through an anger management course and wrote reflective essays on how fighting compromises the school community. When asked to explain the behavioral improvements among students, the School Leader Mr. Goodson stated:

> When people come here they are amazed at how smoothly classes run. They see that our students are sitting in their seats, and working quietly. But they don't understand that they were not this way when we got them nine months ago. They were used to running the classrooms and doing what they wanted to. It took hard work and consistency to create this type of learning environment, it's not magic.

Creating this school environment began with teachers setting high social-behavioral expectations and following through on them. Miss Allen, the English teacher spoke candidly about her view on Excel's social expectations during an interview:

> Our social expectations for our young men are to behave like gentlemen at all times. We expect our males to treat women with respect and not like sex objects. We expect our males to grow up and be fathers to their kids, even though 80% or more of their fathers are absent from their lives.

The Science Teacher, Miss Thomas added:

> I expect my students to come into class quietly, take their seats, and work hard throughout the course. I don't accept talking out, talking back, or quitting. My

students know what to expect of me and they know what I expect of them. This year we spent a lot of time on teaching them how to be students.

Also, the Social Studies Teacher, Mr. Nance shared with me the S.L.A.N.T. acronym, which stands for: (1) Sit up Straight; (2) Look attentive; (3) Ask Questions; (4) Nod your head if you understand; and (5) Track the Speaker. This model served as a measurable framework for expected classroom behaviors and is used in varying degrees by all teachers to manage their classes. Teachers also used a number of verbal prompts to structure student participation during class, and the most commonly used prompt was "1, 2, 3." On this prompt, students raised their hands and waited to be called on to answer a question posed by the teacher. The "5,4,3,2,1" or "3,2,1" prompt was the most often used prompt to refocus noisy students in the hallway or during lunch time. For the most part, they effectively helped teachers keep students on task the vast majority of class time. The interviews revealed that parents, students, and teachers have noticed behavioral and attitudinal improvement in students. Yet, during the participant observation, I found examples of why Mr. Goodson told me "We still don't have it right yet." These complexities will be discussed following the upcoming section on academic excellence.

Academic excellence. It is clear that Excel is dedicated to academic excellence among its students, yet achieving this is a complex endeavor. Evidence of effective academic progress in core subjects are supported by improvements in students' grades, *Stanford 10* reading scores, school results on the State's Standardized tests, and by students' reflections on the gains that they have made.

One of the most memorable moments in the study was during the focus group with the six students that all teachers selected as the best turnaround stories at Excel Academy. I asked these students to: "describe some things that they learned at Excel that they did not learn at their old schools." They listed around 20 different things in a few minutes; here are some of their statements:

"I was never taught about hypotheses in science"
"I never learned about mammals and amphibians"
"I never did an experiment in science before"
"I learned how to add fractions"
"I never was taught how to do word problems"
"I know how to multiply now"
"I can convert a fraction into a number"
"I was never told to read a newspaper"
"I never thought about current events"
"We never talked about presidents and stuff"
"We never did debates in class"
"I could not read when I came here, but now I can"
"I was a bad reader but now I like to read"
"I can spell any word now, if I study it"
"I failed all of my State's tests last year, and I passed them here"
"I did not like school before, and I never missed a day at Excel"

I also asked them to describe their teachers at their old schools, and they replied:

"My teachers did not teach me anything"

"My teacher put worksheets in front of us and did not explain it"
"My teacher did not try to teach she was on her cell phone"
"My teacher just did not care"
"I never got homework"
"My teacher told the whole class that I failed the State's tests last year"

I then asked them to tell me about their teachers at Excel, and they offered:

"They tell us they we will go to college in 2015"
"They want us to be senators and doctors"
"They don't like it when you quit, they want you to keep trying"
"They want us to come back and run the school after we graduate from college"
"They care about us"

Despite the progress that students have made and their positive sentiments toward Excel Academy, the reality still is that much work remains in their pursuit of excellence. In fact, fieldwork uncovered four complexities that students, teachers and the school administrator had to confront.

Instructional Complexities Promoting Excellence

This section will explore four complexities encountered while promoting social and academic excellence among students at Excel Academy. Initial evidence of these complexities emerged from teacher interviews, then classroom observations, student focus groups and following up interviews with teachers were used to understand each phenomenon in greater depth. The four complexities were given terms as they emerged following repeated observations, interviews, and focus groups. They included: (1) *expectations dissonance*; (2) *differential engagement*; (3) *disguised engagement*; and (4) *expectations overload*.

Expectations dissonance. Like any school, Excel Academy has its key areas of concern that included classroom management and student discipline. The following example suggests that having high expectations academically must be matched by equally high expectations for student behavior. Despite the standards that teachers expressed during their interviews, there was clear evidence that some teachers experienced *expectations dissonance*. This concept emerged from fieldwork and describes how some teachers' social expectations varied for the three different academic cohorts of students. That is to say that their social expectations fluctuated for different groupings of students, while their academic expectations remained fairly constant across all groups of students.

For instance, before three of the classes in which most of the disruptions occurred, teachers let me know ahead of time to expect behavioral problems. In essence, they fully expected behavioral problems, which may have caused them to prepare themselves in advance to be a disciplinarian or to react severely to student misconduct. Interestingly enough, teachers still expected all students to do the same work and challenged all groups equally. But, after they shared their low expectations with me, I created a column in my field-journal for *teacher disposition*. This enabled me to describe each teacher's body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and use of disciplinary measures.

In each of the classes that teachers expressed low student social expectations, they became disciplinarians. They were focused on achieving total compliance beginning with demanding "silence" more often than anything else. The S.L.A.N.T. model during these classes was replaced with the S.LA.N.T.S model. The first "S" is for silence in this model, because it was asked for more than anything else when teachers expected problems in a class. The *expectations dissonance* that teachers demonstrated caused them to punish students for the same offenses that were excused during their earlier or later classes. Race was not a factor at this school with all African American teachers and students.

At the end of the school day, I showed the teachers my fields-notes describing their dispositions and discipline patterns during different classes. I also reminded them about the expectations that they shared with me before their classes. To my surprise, the teachers agreed and understood my observations, for one teacher this process confirmed a concern that was already raised by the School Leader Mr. Goodson as well. So, teachers must find synergy between both sets of expectations for all of their classes and students, or they risk contributing to the very behavioral problems that they are trying to prevent. This is even true in an environment of high academic expectations, with culturally diverse and responsive educators, and a supportive community.

> *Disguised engagement.* The second complexity that I observed during my first set of classroom observations was that teachers caught only a small fraction of misbehavior. So, during follow up observations, I decided to increase my participation in classes by casually walking and observing the quality of work that students were doing. I focused on the quality of work because during interviews some teachers were worried that students' work still did not meet their standards. I found that some students were engaged with high quality work; while others looked engaged enough to avoid detection by the teacher but their work was incomplete or incorrect. The concept of *disguised engagement* emerged after synthesizing classroom observations, and it is characterized by: (1) social engagement to avoid teacher's attention; (2) social disengagement when not directly supervised by teachers; and (3) academic disengagement (incomplete class work).

After noticing this initial pattern, I returned to a more passive observer role and noted every off-task behavior (e.g., talking, hitting, getting out of seat, drawing, writing raps), which was common in about 20% of students depending on the cohort. I also noted if the teacher responded to or missed the behavior. I further noted the location of students who were involved and when they decided to "act out." A pattern emerged among students with incomplete work; and more so among students whose work sheets were blank.

First, when teachers were instructing the whole class, these students sat up straight, looked attentive, appeared to be writing, and nodded their heads. In essence, they conformed to the S.L.A.N.T. model mentioned earlier. But soon after the teacher turned to the board or provided help to a specific student, the same few students disengaged and exhibited off-task behaviors. But, they instantly conformed to S.L.A.N.T. when they felt the teacher's attention was back on the whole class.

This was difficult for teachers to detect, because these students conformed to the picture of a model student to disguise their lack of academic engagement. It was as if I was a part of two classes, one in which 18-25 students were on task and learning, and another in which 6-9 students were looking engaged but were academically unengaged. These same students tended to be reprimanded and sent from the class more often than students who were genuinely engaged.

Differential engagement. After spending time with the two cohorts that struggled with *disguised engagement*, I wanted to see if the third cohort of students also exhibited a similar pattern. The third complexity emerged from this inquiry, which requires an explanation of how it emerged. Three new cohorts of students were formed following the first administration of the State's standardized tests in reading and math. The students who passed both tests were placed into this third cohort and attended their regular classes. The other two groups received a three hour block of instruction to prepare them for the retake of the math or reading State's Tests. This strategy enabled 81% students to pass the reading test, and 67% of all students to pass the math portion of the State's standardized test.

The cohort who passed both tests the first time was also regarded as the most mature and well behaved group of students by teachers. In a similar fashion, teachers whispered their expectations to me about this group before class as well. Mr. Lawrence the math teacher shared:

> Now this group will be totally different from the other group. They are really sharp and I won't have any problems with their behavior. We have actually finished the entire 5th grade curriculum already, and I have started on the sixth grade curriculum.

Mr. Lawrence's statement reveals a degree of synergy between his social and academic expectations for this cohort of students, so I was interested to see if his teaching would be affected by his expectations. During this observation, Mr. Lawrence was correct, they were on task, and finished the same work that caused *disguised engagement* among the other cohorts, in a matter of minutes. Mr. Lawrence then proceeded to the work from the sixth grade curriculum using examples from their everyday experiences to explain new concepts. When he finished instructing he assigned some practice work from the new curriculum, and they completed the work and asked for more.

So, I decided to follow this same group throughout the day and found similar patterns in their English class, but a different pattern emerged in one class, Mr. Nance's Social Studies course. During this class, over 60% exhibited the same disruptive behaviors as the other cohorts, but their work was complete and correct. The exact scenario repeated itself during two additional observations of the same class with this same group of students.

Following the third observation, Mr. Nance shared with me his frustrations with making his class more interesting to students. He felt particularly hurt given that state of his class, because he is an African American male who struggled to make Social Studies meaningful to his students. He further shared how he wanted to use more strategies such as debates and discussions, but as a first year teacher he was not quite sure how to do so. So, I shared how I used debates when teaching multicultural education and sociology courses to engage my college students. The following class Mr. Nance used a discussion on skilled labor during the industrial revolution to transition into a debate on the economic and educational philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois. During this exercise, students were engaged both behaviorally and academically, which caused me to ponder the source of the social misconduct that I noticed during other classes.

I was certain that their misbehavior was not a classroom management or discipline issue, because Mr. Nance used the same system as other teachers and was a very organized teacher. Misbehavior was not caused by dissonance between his social and academic expectations

because he expected excellence in both domains. This situation raised countless questions, so I spoke with Mr. Nance about what I noticed again, and he replied:

> Yes, I have been told that students think my class is boring. I struggle to make things like the industrial revolution interesting to them. Part of it is that the students know that they won't have to take the social studies portion of State's Test until the 8th grade. I know that they want to do more debates and current event discussions, but I have to figure out a way to structure them in. You saw in class today when they got a chance to debate each other, they came alive.

This conversation helped me to crystallize this complexity, which was characterized not by academic engagement but social disengagement among students. The term *differential engagement* materialized after this realization, and I deemed that it was most related to the content and delivery of the Social Studies curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2006). After reading a number of his lessons plans, I saw that Mr. Nance's lessons met or exceeded state standards. He also had challenging homework assignments and students' grades indicated that they were mastering key state objectives. A key to understanding this puzzle was that *differential engagement* dissipated when he used more interactive teaching strategies designed to promote critical thinking and personal application of concepts.

But as a first year teacher, he found it a daunting task to transform the state standards-based curriculum to a social justice-centered curriculum that could engage urban African American males. In fact, there are only a few social justice curricula in preparation and even fewer have been tested to see if they could increase motivation and achievement among students (Cammarota, 2007). Unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs do not offer courses on how to teach social justice to middle school urban African American males, so Mr. Nance's struggles to do so are understandable. What is clear, however, is that *differential engagement* will persist in classrooms unless students are challenged intellectually with a cultural relevant curriculum.

Expectations overload. The final and the most troublesome complexity to promoting academic and social excellence at Excel was understanding the pattern of "quitting" observed among some students. This theme emerged as teachers responded to the interview question: Describe an example when your students have failed to meet your academic or social expectations? The Math Teacher, Mr. Lawrence explained:

> A student does not meet my expectations when he quits. If they just give up because they might feel that the work is too hard. They would just sit there with blank papers, and won't even try. I tell them "All I want is for you to try it, and ask questions if you don't understand." Just don't quit on us.

Miss Thomas, the Science Teacher further explained:

> I have seen students quit when the work gets too hard, they would just not try it and put their heads down.

For a follow-up question I asked them: If you could guess, what percentage of students do you feel quit? All teachers estimated a range between 25-30% of students quit at this current point in the year, but they also shared that over half of their students used to quit on a regularly basis earlier in the year.

Following these interviews, I began school and classroom observations intent on understanding the phenomenon of "quitting." It did not take long because my first observation was in a class with of a group of students who were relearning skills in preparation for the retake of the math portion of the State's Test. Before class, Mr. Lawrence gave me a copy of the work that students were going to be doing for that day. I sat down and looked over all of the problems, and thought to myself that these are some tough problems, many of which were word problems. So, I began to document every interaction and behavior that I saw in the classroom. This is when I first noticed signs of *disguised engagement* (behaving, misbehaving, and incomplete work). I observed closely the work of some students and noticed that many of their word problems and more complex problems were incomplete.

I followed this group of students to their science course, in which Miss Thomas prepared a lesson and experiment to help students understand hypotheses, controls and variables. Curious, I took a look at the same set of males' papers from math that struggled with word problems, and found that they had not attempted all of their work in science. Particularly missing were responses to higher order thinking questions like: What are some differences and similarities between mammals and amphibians? Later in class they also did not complete questions that required them to read a short example of an experiment and select the hypothesis, variables and control.

The following day the same patterns emerged among the same group of students, which was only around ten out of thirty-five students during math, and five out of twenty students during science. On the second day of observations I became more active helping students with problems in math and with understanding some of the concepts in science. All classes were arranged so that students could work in groups of three to four students, and in most cases entire groups were not completing their work. Another interesting observation was that these groups tended to be in the back row, grouped together, and in the furthest corners from the teacher.

When I approached students I typically asked: "Why are you sitting here and not working?" Students responded with "I don't understand this," "I can't figure this out," "I don't know what to do," or "I don't get it." For instance, one problem in math asked them to: Calculate the volume of a cube when the side equals 7? Most students that I observed sketched a three dimensional cube on their papers, but could not go any further. I later found out that Mr. Lawrence brought cubes to class during the lesson on volume, so they recalled the cube from former lessons. Some even understood that a cube is equal on all sides, but none of students with blank paper knew the equation for the volume of a cube. It was written on the board and highlighted, but they never made the connection. Perhaps because the equation read: V= height x width x depth. So, I reminded them about the equation on the board and used the cubes that they drew on their papers to show them the height, width and depth of a cube. They read the problem again and were able to complete the problem on their own. I found that students needed around 30 seconds of individualized instruction to explain concepts, and then they were more than willing and capable of completing the required computation on their own.

This pattern held in three core subjects out of four for this same group of students. Afterwards, I asked myself: Are these students quitting or is there something else occurring? Quitting from the teachers' perspective is when a student does not complete the work, does not attempt the work and does not ask for help, because these are the behaviors that they typically observed. I contend that *quitting* is symptomatic of a larger process, namely *expectations overload*. This concept helps us to consider: What challenges a student faces when he is placed

in a school with high academic and social expectations for the first time in his life? This change in normative systems may very well yield a form of *intellectual shock* unexplored in educational research. This temporary state may be caused by students being exposed to high social and academic expectations by teachers, parents and their peers for the first time in their lives. In short, this culture of high expectations required students to utilize social and academic competencies that many of them were never challenged to activate in their former schools, resulting in *expectations overload*.

Understanding how the school and students responded to address the pattern of "quitting" requires exploring the school's core values. Excel Academy for Boys is designed for African American males, and has adopted the seven values of Kwanzaa, the African American celebration of family, community and culture. Students memorized each value through songs, and each student must sign a "student commitment to excellence" agreement promising to uphold the seven values of Kwanzaa. These are the Kwanzaa values and how they are articulated at Excel Academy:

1) Unity – We work to create togetherness, harmony and we seek peace;
2) Self-determination – We work to define how we will be known;
3) Collective Work & Responsibility – We work to solve problems and seek solutions;
4) Cooperative Economics – We work to make sure that there is enough, we share;
5) Purpose – We work with urgency and intent, we seek our destiny;
6) Creativity – We work to make things better, we seek service;
7) Faith – We believe in ourselves and others, we seek the best in everyone.

Interestingly enough, during the course of interviews and focus groups I learned that students and teachers developed an eighth value in response to quitting, "Never Quit." The "Never Quit" value emerged in direct response to this tendency *expectations overload*, which affected both the efforts' of teachers and students as they encountered social and academic complexities. Each of the seven Kwanzaa values are typically taught to children in their Swahili form. *Imani* for instance is Swahili for faith, but there is no direct translation to Swahili for "Never quit." However, the Swahili noun *imara* means perseverance, endurance, power, or strength. Here *imara* is defined as the power to persevere, and it captures the combined efforts of families, teachers and students as they pursued success together, despite the complexities that they encountered along the way.

In the end, I do not believe that it is important to answer the question: Are students quitting? But, what I am certain of is that *quitting* is not an option at Excel Academy. They will not let each another quit. If you visit Excel you may hear a teacher ask a question, and call on a student who may begin to struggle to find an answer. Look again, do not be caught off guard by his classmates extending their hands toward him and tickling their fingers as if they were playing a piano. This is how the young men of Excel Academy encourage each other to keep thinking, keep working, never quit. Down the hall in another class you may hear students chanting "never quit, never, never quit… never quit, never, never quit. This is their eighth school value never quit, always persist and persevere.

Discussion and Recommendations

Despite the four complexities encountered in the pursuit of excellence, the students and school forged values that have enabled them to persist. This contradicts notions that African children, communities and cultures are detrimental to success among students. It is this shared power that animated the efforts and expectations of students and teachers, and represents a localized movement to address the complexities that they encountered.

In sum, a spirit of perseverance pushed teachers to: (1) find innovative ways to teach material; (2) to employ different strategies to promote behavioral excellence; (3) to seek students' advice on how to improve their classes; and (4) to possess optimism for continued success in the upcoming year. Among students, imara created: (1) a desire to achieve and meet Excel's academic and social standards; (2) a peer culture that encouraged the pursuit of academic and social excellence; and (3) a belief that teachers have their best interests at heart. Yet, specific recommendations for educators to address each complexity are warranted, particularly given the increase in single gendered schools for African American males.

Recommendations

In my view, the complexities articulated in the prior sections are signs of a healthy, growing school in the process of undoing the damage of miseducation on students and educators. In this section, I will offer recommendations to address *expectations dissonance, disguised engagement, differential engagement,* and *expectations overload*. The goal of this section is not to offer universal recommendations for all single-gender schools serving African American males in urban settings; rather, readers should consider these insights as guides to understand and address specific cases in their schools.

Expectations dissonance. This study revealed that maintaining high expectations for students, both socially and academically, is always a challenge because it is a dynamic process. One technique that I find helpful is a *self-check* before teaching. I ask myself a series of questions on the way to work:

1) How do you feel today? Acknowledge within yourself the various personal factors that might influence your disposition with your students, today. This is extremely important for African American male teachers, because their quality of interaction with the African American males will determine how closely a student will decide to emulate him;

2) Why do I teach? Being a purpose-inspired teacher will help you to take a developmental approach with your students. You should have a firm but care-centered commitment for your students. Firm consequences follows inappropriate actions, but so should a developmental moment to reassure students;

3) Am I excited about my lesson today? If you are not reasonably excited about your lesson, an African American male student will figure it out. African American males will equate your level of enthusiasm about a subject with its level of importance;

4) What's my level of tolerance for misbehavior? Teachers should not love to discipline but discipline because they love. Indiscriminate disciplining promotes

anger, confusion and frustration in African American males, and compromises teacher effectiveness.

Many times teachers set their expectations for students before class even starts, performing a *self check* will allow teachers to walk into the classroom with success inducing expectations.

Disguised engagement. All single-gender schools for urban African American males should take baseline reading, science, and math measurements on each student, and sort students into heterogeneous groupings to avoid the harmful effects of tracking (Steele, 2004). Yet, overcoming *disguised engagement* is also an issue related to resources and support. Haberman's (1995) research on successful teachers of urban children found that great teachers used whole-class instruction, and avoided moving from student to student addressing specific concerns. Teachers at Excel Academy primarily use this method, but the effectiveness of this strategy is short-circuited if a student disguises his engagement. They conformed to social expectations to avoid disciplinary responses, but disengaged academically. To address this likelihood, having smaller classes of 20 students or a teaching assistant would allow for both whole classroom instruction and individualized instruction to occur simultaneously.

Differential engagement. Contrary to popular opinion, African American males are intelligent, and their curiosity can be sparked or extinguished by teachers and poorly designed curricula (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). For African American males whose intellectual curiosity has been smothered by years of poor instruction and irrelevant curricula, teaching to the proverbial "middle" will create behavioral problems regardless of student ability. Teachers in single-gender schools for African American males should teach to the *outer edge*, and provide support to students as they grapple with new knowledge. Teachers at Excel Academy taught to this *outer edge* by using experiments, creative writing, current events, and complex word problems. Yet, their lack of resources did not allow them to have smaller classes or teaching assistants to provide the greater support to students. The scarcity of resources caused much of the complexities noted throughout this paper.

Expectations overload. I would argue that a school's expectations are not high enough, there curriculum is not challenging enough, and their social expectations are not in line with excellence if they do not see signs of *expectations overload*, particularly early in the school year. This is not to be avoided but carefully induced. When noticed, teachers and parents should give proper support to students. To induce *overload*, schools should begin with the goal of preparing all African American males to graduate with honors from the college of their choice. Next, design and sequence a curriculum that will prepare them with the intellectual and social competencies necessary to excel in college, not just to attend. Make sure that the curricula and teacher lesson plans meet state guidelines, are culturally relevant, require the use of technology, experimentation, inquiry, and written and verbal articulation.

Most importantly, perhaps the greatest resource to help students overcome *intellectual shock* is their peers in the context of peer support groups (Khan & Reis, 2006). Encourage a whole response, with students as the key actors in changing the behavior and encouraging the peers. Again, I would be concerned if African American males are not exhibiting signs of *expectations overload*. This may ultimately mean that the new school environment and expectations are too similar to the schools that have failed them in the past. So, induce, look for, and respond supportively to *expectations overload*.

Conclusion

Over a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois posed this question concerning the African American experience: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Today, on the heels of four decades of *problem-based* resiliency research we must now ask: How does it feel to be told that you are a problem? In schools across this country, African American males are perceived and treated as the problem child, the "other citizen." They are called disadvantaged, at-risk, troubled youth, and a lost generation, among many other names. This chorus is joined by policy makers, researchers, and educators who for the last half century have crafted *problem-centered* approaches to school reform based upon this jaded image of African American culture, families and children. We now stand at a crossroads, for it is clear that these measures have failed to transform American urban education in a manner that would promote excellence among African American males (Kozol, 2005; National Urban League, 2007; Nuguera, 2008; Nuguera & Wing, 2006).

This work represents a contribution in a growing effort to define African American male educational realities and experiences in terms and theories that break free from the *problem-based* approaches that have compromised the integrity and effectiveness of resiliency research. When researchers consider urban children and families as *problems,* learners are not allowed to be complex, flawed and powerful, all at once (Landsman, 2004; Washington Post, 2007).

Toward this goal, this work offered a critical race theory critique of educational resilience research and advanced some guiding principles for *power-based* research into educational excellence among urban African American males attending a single-gender school. Second, the present study detailed four complexities encountered at Excel Academy in their pursuit of social and academic excellence. Finally, practical recommendations were offered to address each of the four complexities that emerged at Excel Academy for Boys.

These four complexities are not signs of community, educator, or student deficits; rather, challenges such as these should be expected when trying to serve a population of students who have been neglected by the wider educational system (Noguera & Wing, 2006). To the credit of all involved with Excel Academy for Boys, they have adopted a set of values that emanated from within African American culture, providing them with a culturally relevant framework within which these complexities are being addressed. More importantly, when these values were not enough, the students and teachers fashioned one that gave them the power to persevere and to never quit.

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Dr. Marlon C. James is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. His teaching, service, and research center on urban leadership development through the application of cultural competency and social justice leadership theory and practice. Additionally, Dr. James focuses on meeting the academic and social needs of urban males students, transforming school and classroom cultures in urban schools, and supporting families in creating educational environments in their homes. Dr. James' authentic approach to urban education is born from his experiences in a single parent family that endured poverty, drug abuse, shelters, gangs, and community violence on the South Side of Chicago. Dr. James is currently engaged in several projects related to urban school reform including: 1) a study of the Kappa Leadership Institute of Chicago, one the most successful community-based college preparatory programs for urban African American males in the nation. This project is designed to discern the philosophies, partnerships, practices and pedagogical strategies that enabled this volunteer organization to maintain a 100% four-year college admissions rate for the past six years in STEM majors; 2) Additionally, Dr. James is partnering with community organizations to produce the parent engagement and empowerment training series called 3 K Curriculum (Know your child, school and community); 3) Lastly, Dr. James is researching the impact of UCAPPs newly designed social justice leadership curriculum on future school leaders' ability to promote culturally responsive instructional improvements, community engagement and empowering school cultures.