Starting Young: Emergent Black Masculinity and Early Literacy

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This research is based on the premise that a culturally relevant focus on enhancing literacy skills is needed to help Black males thrive. The study explores masculine practices of literacy in a group of first and second grade students attending a summer academic enrichment program. This exploration of masculine literacy practices is based in part on a sociocultural perspective of literacy and on Kirkland and Jackson's (2009) theorization of Black masculine literacies. Connecting theory on Black masculine literacy to the reading and writing practices the authors observed in the study illuminated the following findings: (1) the young Black males demonstrated fluency and an understanding of linguistic complexities as they encoded and decoded social texts; and (2) students engaged in multiple expressions of Black masculine literacy; while all of these expressions served a functional purpose, only some of the expressions of Black masculine literacy were linked to academic achievement.

Keywords: Alternative expressions of masculinity, Black masculine literacy, early literacy

Persistent academic difficulties among Black males have been and continue to be widely documented. Notable among the indicators of academic difficulty for Black males are disproportionately low literacy scores (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009; Rashid, 2009; Tatum, 2008). Literacy challenges contribute to Black males' disproportionate placement in special education (Finkel, 2010; Kunjufu, 2005) and are associated with negative life outcomes including poverty, school dropout, unemployment, and incarceration (Rashid, 2009; Hernandez, 2011). Research with the goal of understanding and improving Black male literacy is therefore important to help ensure positive life outcomes for this group.

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Scholars and educators with expertise in issues affecting Black males have called attention to ways in which the persistent documentation of academic difficulties for this group reifies images of Black males as perpetually at-risk and in crisis (e.g., Haddix, 2009; James, 2010). As opposed to such deficit perspectives of Black males, the research presented in this article is grounded in the premise that a culturally relevant focus on literacy can help Black males thrive and excel (James, 2010; Tatum, 2006, 2008; Slaughter-Defoe & Richards, 1995). Thus, this study is aimed at understanding the literacy practices of Black male youth to improve their literacy instruction.

In this article, the researchers explore masculine practices of literacy as they occurred in a summer academic enrichment program. This study is based in part on a sociocultural perspective of literacy which recognizes multiple literacies, including written and oral languages that are embedded within specific socio-political contexts and which have relevancy for specific groups interacting within those contexts (Gee, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 1997, 1999; Street, 2003). This study focuses on the constructs of gender and masculinity as specific contexts for understanding Black male literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective. The specific context of the masculine practices of literacy explored here is a summer academic enrichment program with first and second grade students. In basing the research on a culturally relevant model of literacy instruction, this study extends previous research on culturally relevant pedagogy for Black learners (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Tatum, 2006, 2008). In an effort to increase Black male reading proficiency in school, this study asserts a strength-centered perspective that honors the multiple literacies that Black males engage in both inside and outside of classroom contexts (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

Boys and Literacy

The persistent finding that female students outperform male students on standardized tests of literacy (Maynard, 2002) has led to substantial research on boys and literacy and revealed the need to overtly challenge "cultural and social constructions of gender" in the classroom (Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010, p. 360). Much of this research focuses on the influence schools and teachers have had on the literacy performance of male students (Martino & Kehler, 2007), including the apparent mismatch between the feminization of schools (due to the preponderance of female teachers who impart feminine culture on the school environment) and boys' underperformance in literacy (Davis, 2001, 2003).

Some research focuses specifically on the feminization of reading that causes boys to devalue literacy (Askew & Ross, 1998; Kimmel, 2000). Still other research has focused on male students and their unique psychosocial and emotional needs during literacy instruction (e.g., Brozo, 2002). Amidst this growing trend in research on boys, masculinity, and literacy, some authors have suggested that focused research is needed to examine how literacy performance of male students is influenced by race/ethnicity, SES, sexuality, geography, or other factors. Martino and Kehler (2007) wrote, "It is only by interrogating assumptions about boys, masculinity, and schooling, and by adopting a sophisticated conceptual or analytical framework …that a more informed basis for pedagogical reform can be established and justified to improve boys' literacy skills" (p. 408).

Black Male Youth, Masculinities, and Schooling

Schools are critical sites for gendered learning and development (Davis, 2001; Porsche, Ross, & Snow, 2004). For Black males the school environment is a particularly important site for masculine identity development (Majors & Billson, 1992; Davis, 2003). Davis (2001) explored intersections of masculinity, race, and gender among middle school Black males, with an emphasis on how these young men understood and negotiated constructs of race and gender. Davis argued that the contradictory social positioning of Black male youth as both athletic heroes and dangerous, academically at-risk troublemakers encouraged them to embrace a form of learning and development centered on a Black masculine code of conduct. Further, Davis found that this Black masculinized code of conduct was distinct from conventional school norms and traditional (i.e., White or Eurocentric) masculine norms. Davis argued that this "masculine code creates their own space for resistance to a school culture and climate that excludes and labels them as at-risk city boys with very few academic strengths" (p.175). This masculine code, according to Davis, also "serves as a form of protest and defiance that wrestles against negative expectations of teachers and peers" (p. 175).

While presenting this masculinized code as an adaptive strategy for young Black males, Davis (2001) nevertheless identified negative aspects and consequences of this strategy for the Black males in his study. Importantly, this performance strategy limited the conceptions of Black masculinity available to these young Black males because any behavior that ran counter to the code was considered inappropriate masculinity. Thus, Davis noted that the code was used to police and penalize other Black males who did not conform.

Whereas performances of Black masculinity can be understood as coping mechanisms to help young Black male students contend with educational environments that are often confusing, racist and oppressive, these performances are often misinterpreted by school personnel, thereby, exacerbating negative school outcomes (Davis, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992; Tatum, 2005).

Adding further support to the relationship between performances of masculinity and negative schooling outcomes is Spencer's (1999) study of school-related factors associated with hypermasculinity in culturally diverse male youth. Spencer's longitudinal study of academic competence explored predictors and correlations of a hypermasculine identity in male youth in grades 8-10 in a southeastern state. Spencer found that for Black and male youth of color, negative teacher perceptions and lack of popularity with peers were directly and significantly associated with engaging a hypermasculine identity and poor school adjustment.

Black Males, Masculinities, and Literacy

Porche et al. (2004) explored how gendered messages and practices during children's early literacy training are associated with boys' attitudes about reading, literacy practices, and later academic achievement. The researchers tracked students over a 10-year period starting in preschool. Although no significant differences were found in boys' and girls' language and literacy ability, gender differences began to appear early. When the participants were 4 years old, their mothers' interaction was different for girls versus boys during reading activities, placing less emphasis on reading for boys. By 7th grade, the boys were heavily socialized toward male gender roles that appeared to influence their literacy achievement in that they were less likely to like reading and had lower English grades. Interestingly, the authors found discrepancies in some of the boys' reported dislike of reading and simultaneous expression of enjoyment over reading

adventure, sports-related, or horror themed texts. The authors concluded that the boys' interest in reading was embedded within masculine socialization that linked interest in reading to texts that were compatible with masculine culture; therefore, boys did not necessarily have lower reading abilities, but were being put at risk by narrow interpretations of acceptable reading practices.

In the same way, Tatum (2005) argued that young Black males often contend with life in dangerous and unpredictable environments, and literacy instruction must be relevant to the issues they face to attract and sustain their attention. The role of teachers, Tatum argued, was to recognize the multiple literacies Black males need to be successful and to create learning environments that foster useful academic, cultural, emotional, and social literacies. Tatum reconceptualized the role of Black male literacy as a symbolic and practical means to transcend the turmoil of their lives.

In a study of 11 to 14-year old Black male students, who self-defined themselves as *cool kids*, Kirkland & Jackson (2009) sought to theorize how these young Black male learners engaged in literary practices to define themselves as *cool*. Building on the multiple literacies of young Black males articulated by Tatum (2005), Kirkland and Jackson's analysis focused on the critical cultural competencies that the young men performed, articulated, or wore that were associated with Black masculine textual production and social meanings. Notable among their findings was the fact that the students in their study were considered "barely literate" when using a narrow definition of literacy, yet they engaged in complex and nuanced non-traditional Black masculine literary practices. For example, the youth in Kirkland and Jackson's study demonstrated sophisticated mastery of *cool* vernacular, clothing, and songs in constructing "a narrative of who these young men wanted to be" (p. 278). The youth also demonstrated fluency in Black masculine literacy by moving in and out of cool as needed to guard their conversations and by playing with language to extend its use and style.

Thus, research suggests that although gendered and racialized patterns in academic engagement begin to emerge prior to youth's entry into the formal school environment (Porsche et al., 2004), schools are important sites where such patterns are elaborated and entrenched (Davis, 2001; Porsche et al., 2004). Boys' underperformance in literacy is not due to cognitive ability, but gender socialization that leads to a lack of engagement in school-based literacy practices for Black males (Porsche et al., 2004). Further, masculine practices by Black male youth in educational settings can be understood as coping responses (Spencer, 1999) or adaptive strategies (Davis, 2001) that can result in both positive and negative schooling outcomes (Davis, 2001; Majors Billson, 1992; Tatum, 2005). Though there is emerging research that specifically connects the masculinity of Black male youth to their literacy practices (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Porsche et al., 2004; Tatum, 2005), research that explores the social context within which Black masculine literacies are created is rare (e.g., Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). This rarity substantiates the need for more research such as the present study on how Black males enact masculinity through literacy activities.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on a sociocultural perspective of literacy or New Literacy Studies (NLS; Gee, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 1997, 1999; Street, 2003), and expands on Kirkland and Jackson's (2009) theorizing of Black adolescent masculine literacy practices. NLS posited the notion of literacy as a social practice shaped by the cultural context and local institutional power relations (Gee, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 1997, 1999; Street, 2003). Literacy is embedded in other

social practices and institutions; it is related to "oral language and with ways of acting, interacting, and thinking, not just reading and writing," (Gee, 2005, p. 19) and is "associated with the crafting of individual identities" (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 101). To be literate is to be able to use and understand the language involved in different social practices in order to interpret and interact with texts (written, spoken, visual) embedded in communities and social institutions.

Everyday literacy is comprised of events where interpretation of the texts take place (Heath, 1983), becoming part and parcel of literacy practices or patterns of behaviors and their role in society and culture (Street, 2003). Schooled literacy is best acquired when it is built upon home practices (everyday literacy) related to "concepts of textuality, figured worlds, identity, and power," and are contextualized by incorporating different communicative modes within the literacy practice (Street, 2003, p. 82). In the same vein, it is important to integrate the students' cultural resources into the curricula to connect the students' everyday literacy, world views, and background knowledge to the concepts learned at school (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This practice connects everyday literacy to academic or schooled literacy, negotiated by creating social spaces in classrooms where students can express their opinions, develop the necessary linguistic skills to communicate their experiences, and reflect upon them to strengthen their persona or identities. In this way, the students' epistemological curiosity and critical thinking will be fostered (Freire, 1998, 2005), cultivating their ability to analyze, to evaluate, and to participate in change that impacts their lives and identities (Freire, 2001).

Discourse and Identity

Discourse with a capital D is regarded as socially and culturally situated (Scheppegrell, 2004). It integrates the language in use with symbols, objects, ways of expressing, believing, valuing, and acting in a given interaction to project a recognizable identity (Gee, 2001) with dialectically related elements (Fairclough, 2001). Discourses are attained by enculturation into social practices "through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (Gee, 2006, p. 139). Participating in a Discourse requires the assumption of a specific social identity. A social identity incorporates ways of talking, acting, and interacting within specific social activities, such as classroom performance and discussions (Gee, 2001, 2006). Thus, students enact social identities while participating in classroom Discourse. However, other Discourses, such as the Discourse of gender, might merge, impacting the way students respond to the different classroom activities involved in the lessons.

Young Black male adolescents reflect masculinity through their style, drawings, and specific ways of talking that incorporate musical rhythm, such as rapping. These masculine enactments are strongly influenced by hip-hop culture, "a cultural code that could help shape black male identities" (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009, pp. 287-288). In the same way, young Black boys reflect their masculinity by supporting male stereotypes portrayed in texts (Young, 2000). Through literacy activities that include enabling texts (Tatum, 2006) and that allow different ways of expressing understanding, young learners have the opportunity to act and interact in personal ways, exhibiting their identities as students and as members of a social group. At the same time, they make connections with characters that display positive traits that might positively reinforce their identities and strengthen their personalities.

Purpose

This study examined the language and literacy behaviors of 7 to 9 year-old Black boys. Like Kirkland and Jackson (2009), who theorized young men employed Black masculine symbol systems to engage in practices of literacy, this study examined practices of the rising second and third grade students in this study. Also like Kirkland and Jackson (2009), this study used a literacy approach that afforded broader understandings of literacy to explore specific ways "literacy formed and functioned within the group" (p. 278), rather than assuming that the students in this study lacked literacy.

Research Questions

1. How did students in this study practice literacy and develop meaning through various forms of communication and presentation?
2. How were masculinities expressed by Black male students while participating in literacy practices during the summer enrichment program?

Setting and Participants

Findings in this article are derived from a larger case study (Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2003) that explored perceived changes in Black males' reading proficiency and self-understanding associated with critical literacy instruction and the use of enabling texts (Tatum, 2006). The study occurred during a four-week literacy program housed in a community center in a small town in the southeastern United States. The summer academic enrichment program implemented a literacy pedagogy that incorporated critical literacy instruction and activities that enabled students to express their understanding using different communicative modes (Street, 2003). Through this approach, students were provided with skills needed to decode and critically evaluate the validity of ideas presented in the texts (Luke & Freebody, 1997, 1999; Vasquez, 2004).

Case studies are in-depth explorations of activities or individuals based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2008) and are particularly useful for gaining information on processes, contexts, and issues for which there is scant information available or where the processes involved are poorly understood (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). As such, a case study methodology was deemed appropriate for this study's focus on the benefits of critical literacy and enabling texts for young Black males. Participants in the larger study were 9 males and 2 females (ages 7 to 9) who had just completed the first or second grade. Participants were drawn from a population of primarily Black students enrolled in a non-profit community program providing after-school and summer enrichment activities. The parents of all participants signed consent forms for their children to be included in the study and all students also provided their assent.

During the summer enrichment program, members of the research team used individual and small group discussions, literacy circles, and large-group discussions to engage students in critical literacy practices. Participants were asked to communicate their understandings of the texts through creative expression (e.g., rap/poetry, movement, and illustration). Participants were also asked to communicate connections they perceived between the texts and their own lives. Data collection for the larger study included multiple types of artifacts obtained through group observations, student interviews, student creative works, audio-taped small and large group

discussions, and field notes. Qualitative data analysis was conducted and emergent themes were identified and coded. Observational notes, researcher journals, and discussions between researchers about the data were used to triangulate findings (Baxter & Jake, 2008).

Despite the fact that this study was not originally intended to investigate Black masculinities, the actions of the participants and the data collected by the researchers were relevant to this field of study. Therefore, in this article, the authors illuminate the Black masculine literacy practices of nine African American male students, and focus specifically on the literacy practices of two students, Daniel and Joshua (pseudonyms), whose behaviors revealed the existence of multiple and complex Black masculine literacies (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

Findings

Is This Literacy?

From the outset of the program, during the last week of June 2012, the researchers planned a variety of activities to fulfill three goals: (1) to enrich the students' literacy skills; and (2) to empower students with enabling texts; and (3) to encourage the use of multi-modal approaches through which the students could communicate their understanding. These goals were based on the premise that when children came to school, they brought literacy practices from their home and communities (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Heath, 1983) that were reflected in the way they interpret the different literacy events they engaged in the classroom (Street, 2003).

In addition, research on literacy acquisition in school-age children suggests girls outperform boys in standardized literacy assessments (Maynard, 2002). One reason for this may be the way gender is socially and culturally constructed (Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010). Thus, the focus in this study was on observing the development and display of literacy skills in boys. Of the nine male students who participated in the program, Daniel and Joshua gleaned the most attention because of their salient demonstrations of Black masculine literacy (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

In this study, the male students showed behaviors and interactions that corresponded with practices of Black masculine literacy (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). The researchers observed students rap and engage in movements that imitated the videos of hip hop culture while walking among the workstations. When these students had a break between literacy activities, they often gathered to practice rapping, participate in horseplay, and engage in name-calling, often with the older boys usually initiating the behavior and the younger boys ending up with hurt feelings or even crying at times. Even the illustrations created by boys in the program corresponded to expressions of Black masculine literacy described by Kirkland and Jackson (2009) by depicting basketball and other athletes with jerseys and hairstyles associated with hip hop culture. By contrast, the girls' drawings usually included colorful images of flowers and houses.

In comparison to the girls whose participation in this program was characterized by friendly cooperation and communication, the boys were constantly competing in all of their activities, even when eating snacks. The boys also required much closer monitoring than the girls. For example, very close monitoring was required for the boys during bathroom breaks because they would engage in horseplay with each other in the hallways and inside the bathroom.

All of the previous examples represent expressions of Black masculine literacy (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). From a socio-cultural perspective, literacy is the use and understanding of the language to communicate knowledge (Gee, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 1997, 1999; Street, 2003) and is embedded in other social practices or Discourses (Gee, 2001). The boys in this study were participating in the Discourse of gender by showing a set of behaviors and ways of interacting which projected the kind of persons they wanted to be identified with (Gee, 2006) in the schooled mirrored context. Like the young men in Kirkland and Jackson's (2009) study, these identities included sports stars, rappers, and other figures from hip hop culture.

Two Examples of Masculine Behavior as Literacy

In this study, different expressions of masculine behavior were displayed during literacy activities: On one hand, the researchers observed expressions of masculinity reminiscent of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). On the other hand, the researchers observed a contrasting expression of masculinity that showed vulnerability, thoughtfulness, emotional strength, and interest in abiding by the classroom rules.

At the beginning of this study, both Daniel, who at seven years old was the youngest student in the program, and Joshua, an eight-year-old, demonstrated similar attitudes toward the schooled activities. Both wanted to succeed and they followed directions closely. However, by the end of the first week, Daniel began to demonstrate behaviors that the researchers interpreted as communicating male superiority and hegemonic Black masculine literacy (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009), while Joshua's behaviors continued to reflect alternative expressions of Black masculine literacy. For example, the authors conducted a debate based on the 1997 book *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka between Daniel and Krystal (pseudonym), one of the two female students in the program and also Daniel's cousin. During the debate, Daniel stood very tall, with his chest up. He looked at Krystal defiantly while arguing. In contrast, Joshua, although attentive and interested in the debate activity, participated by expressing his opinion in a less provocative fashion and avoided intimidating behaviors. The significance of Joshua's expression of masculinity lies in the incorporation of respect for other's opinions and women's roles in society; because his behaviors ran counter to behaviors associated with hegemonic masculinity, the authors interpreted Joshua's actions as representing an alternative expression of black masculinity.

Masculinities were also expressed as students engaged in literature responses. Soon after starting, the researchers learned that not every student was willing or able to write down their responses. Therefore, rap was incorporated as a way for students to respond to literature. This strategy was very successful among the boys. Some of the boys who struggled with writing felt accomplished by showing their understandings of the literature through oral communication, particularly in rap style.

During the second week of the program, students were asked to make a rap that represented their responses to the 2006 book *The Gum-Chewing Rattler* by Joe Hayes. Both Joshua and Daniel liked the activity and fully engaged in the assignment by chanting rhythmically and following the beats produced by one of the other boys. However, Joshua's literature response stuck close to the storyline of the book. On the other hand, Daniel did not adhere to the storyline of the book. Instead he created lyrics that mimicked hip-hop rappers. Although the fluency of language that Daniel demonstrated was impressive, creating rhymes resembling Dr. Seuss stylistics, his hegemonic masculine behavior was evident. Thus, rather than

reflecting on the storyline of the book, his behavior seemed designed to get the older boys' attention. His hand movements and body position while rapping evidenced his intention of looking and sounding "cool." He began his rap about walking in the desert; in each line that follows, he created words that rhyme with "desert." Both raps are exemplified below:

Joshua's Rap	*Daniel's Rap*
The desert is a dangerous place	One time I'm walkin' to the desert
Because of the rattle snakes and its fangs are…	I mean cesert
it's fangs…	I mean mesert
rattle snake, our body say,	I mean kesert,
say rattle snakes, rattle snakes	I mean squesert…

As the program continued, Daniel seemed increasingly focused on exhibiting coolness. His concern shifted to being accepted by the older boys and mimicking their behaviors. Meanwhile, his attitude toward academics became almost total disinterest. In contrast, Joshua remained focused on tasks, demonstrating pride on his work, and showing responsibility and vulnerability. For instance, when the researchers asked the students to write a story about the worst experience in their lives and how they overcame it (as a response to the 2007 book *Henry's Freedom Box* by Ellen Levine), Joshua engaged in the task and produced a story about being bullied. Joshua's explanation of the story and drawings is presented below; it demonstrates the emotional strength and vulnerability that we argue are characteristics of alternative expressions of masculine literacy practices.

> Joshua: When I get bully I get scared, then he [the bully] had put me in the trash can then I asked for help then the janitor helped me get out the trash can then I had been happy, then when I got home I told, I tell my parents.

Although Joshua and Daniel frequently drew images of basketball stars and basketball culture, and both were attracted to rap music, Black masculine literacy was expressed in different ways by these two boys. For Daniel, being male meant to be aggressive, to misbehave, and to be contentious while Joshua expressed masculinity by showing respect, responsibility, vulnerability, emotional strength, and pride in his work. These different expressions of Black masculine literacy were also associated with different levels of academic success.

Discussion

There are three primary implications of this research related to: (1) the multiple black masculine practices of literacies illuminated in this case study; (2) the fluency that the young Black males demonstrated in encoding and decoding social texts; (3) and the connections between Black masculine literacy and academic achievement. In the sections that follow, the study elaborates on these implications and makes connections between the findings and broader implications for the literacy instruction of Black males.

Multiple Black Masculine Literacies

Findings from Kirkland and Jackson's (2009) study of Black masculine literacies helped to conceptualize the present research on the Black masculine literacy practices of the 7 to 9-year old Black males in this study; however, unlike the study by Kirkland and Jackson, which focused on one expression of Black masculine literacy, this study identified two expressions of Black masculine literacy that were practiced by the young men who participated in this summer enrichment program. One expression was characterized by aggressive and competitive behavior and, at times also included oppositional and confrontational behavior. This expression of Black masculine literacy is reflective of what has been termed *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 1996; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Although expressions of hegemonic masculinity were most common among the boys in this case study, expressions of alternative masculinities (i.e., expressions that did not conform to cultural norms) were also evident as the young men encoded and decoded social and literary texts. By contrasting the expressions of hegemonic masculinity that Daniel used to engage in literacy practices with Joshua's alternative expressions of masculinity, this study contributes to literature on Black males and literacy by shedding light on the multiple Black masculine literacies that emerged from students in this study. In doing so, the researchers of this study join other researchers interested in theorizing "Black males into conversations on literacy" (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009, p. 294).

Like the study by Kirkland and Jackson (2009), the young Black males in this study used expressions of Black masculine literacies to construct and communicate their identities and also to interpret texts. Also consistent with findings by Kirkland and Jackson, students in this study demonstrated mastery in their practices of literacy even though a number of them were labeled, by traditional academic standards, as reading below grade level. The researchers found examples of fluency in both hegemonic Black masculine literacy practices and alternative Black masculine literacy practices.

Although many of the young Black males in this study evidenced fluency in the literacy practices they engaged in during the study, some of the Black masculine literacy practices that they engaged in were more conducive to academic achievement than others. In the following section, the connections between the Black masculine literacy practices observed and the academic achievement of the students in this study are further discussed by returning again to the two students who most exemplified hegemonic and alternative Black masculine literacy practices: Daniel and Joshua.

Black Masculine Literacy and Academic Achievement

Though many of the young men in this study were able to demonstrate fluency in their literacy practices, that fluency did not translate into academic success for most. The students, who displayed hegemonic expressions of Black masculinity (i.e., excessive competitiveness, aggressive teasing and name-calling, and repetitive masculine posturing) in their literacy practices, often suffered a lack of academic achievement. The connection between hegemonic expressions of Black masculinity and academic underachievement occurred for several reasons.

First, excessive masculine posturing diverted the boys' attention away from the literacy activities at hand. Moreover, as the boys engaged in aggressive ridicule and competitiveness with one another, they often got in trouble for displaying behaviors that ran counter to the positive,

respectful, but critical-thinking learning environment this study sought to establish. Sometimes, the boys' misbehavior even resulted in isolation from the other students to avoid what was recognized as "misbehavior epidemics," or dramatic expressions of misbehavior that served as a catalyst for increased misbehavior among the group.

Given the interruptions to their learning that resulted from the above-mentioned expressions of hegemonic Black masculinity, it is not difficult to understand the connection between hegemonic Black masculine literacy practices and academic underachievement. The behaviors that were observed among many of the young Black males in this study are representative of the Black masculinity referred to as *cool pose*. Majors and Billson (1992) described the cool pose as an adaptive coping strategy employed by African American males within contexts of racial discrimination that allows them to manage the fear, rage, and stress they experienced in environments of pervasive racism. The cool pose consists of expressions of aloofness, calm, and/or disinterest that are evident in the communication patterns and actions of many Black males (Majors & Billson, 1992; Tatum, 2005).

Although it is an adaptive strategy for survival, when enacted in a formal learning environment, the cool pose can also act as a barrier to academic success because teachers with a lack of understanding about the cool pose are often uncertain of how to work with the African American males who engage this strategy (Alford, McKenry, & Gavazzi, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992; Tatum, 2005). Despite of the researchers' familiarity with the concept of cool pose and efforts to engage the students in literacy activities that supported their cultural learning styles, the researchers found it difficult to keep some of the students (i.e., those who relied solely on hegemonic expressions of Black masculinity) engaged in the curricula and on task. In contrast, the authors found that the Black male students who engaged alternative Black masculine literacy practices were able to demonstrate fluency in literacy within informal educational contexts and accomplish high levels of academic achievement within formal educational contexts.

Throughout this program, the researchers observed how Joshua's expressions of masculine literacy were conducive to more open communication and to positive, consistent behaviors that reinforced his identity and seemingly provided him with the inner strength to resist negative peer pressure. Joshua's masculine expressions supported academic engagement and achievement while Daniel's masculine expressions did not.

Conclusion

In this study, one promising observation was the myriad of ways in which the students in the study demonstrated fluency in literacy. The complex ways they interpreted and manipulated literary and social texts provided strong evidence of their proficiency in the informal literacies that they used to communicate their identities and perspectives. This fluency in literacy is a significant finding, given the prevailing assumption that African American males are deficient in literacy skills (Haddix, 2009; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

However, the fluency in literacy exhibited by the males in this study often did not translate into success in the formal academic environment. This finding highlights the need for more research on teaching strategies that connect the multiple Black masculine literacies to success in the formal school environment. For example, research of this type might focus on the benefits of pro-African American male and Afro-centric curricular interventions (e.g., such as those discussed by Kunjufu, 2005 and Tatum, 2005) that might augment traditional curricula

within which African American males tend to underperform. Such work would utilize a framework based on funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that builds upon the strengths of culturally diverse youth as scaffolds for success in the formal educational environment.

Another important finding from this study was that alternative expressions of Black masculine practices of literacy (e.g., vulnerability and emotional engagement) were associated with academic achievement in the study. This finding does not suggest that alternative expressions of Black masculine literacy are superior to hegemonic expressions of Black masculine literacy. Indeed, the researchers found functional benefits associated with the engagement of both expressions of Black masculine literacy for the young men in the study. For example, young Black students who manifested hegemonic expressions of masculinity participated by leading discussions and by volunteering to present their understandings when the activities were connected with their specific cultural ways of learning. The researchers of this study find significance in this finding because it illuminates two key points: (1) the importance of providing young African American males with opportunities to cultivate hegemonic expressions of Black masculine literacy for success in informal educational contexts with other African American males while (2) encouraging alternative expressions of Black masculine literacy for success in formal educational contexts. Encouraging the cultivation of multiple Black masculine literacy practices holds promise for increasing the ability of Black males to navigate formal and informal learning environments successfully.

Though some researchers have explored practices of alternative Black masculinity, particularly among gay male youth (e.g., Vaught, 2004), most studies of Black masculinity assume a normative Black masculinity (Davis, 2003) most often associated with hegemonic masculine speech and behavior. One possible reason for the lack of research on alternative expressions of Black masculinity among Black male youth is that culturally dominant expressions of Black masculinity that are supported in mass media (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) often become stable expressions of Black male identity during adolescence.

Although a few studies have explored practices of Black masculinity and literacy practices in very young African American males, this study argues that more research on this age group is needed. It is precisely because the identities of young African American males are not fully stabilized before adolescence that research and interventions aimed at this age group hold promise. If interventions that encourage practices of multiple expressions of Black masculinity are implemented among very young African American males, the likelihood that these students will retain Black masculine literacy practices associated with academic success increases.

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