

# “I’m Keeping My Son Home”: African American Males and the Motivation to Homeschool

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*Academic interest in homeschooling has increased over the last decade, as what was once perceived as a marginal development has turned into a significant and growing phenomenon. There has been, in recent years, a noticeable surge in African American involvement in the homeschooling movement as well. However, there continues to be a general paucity of research on the motivations of homeschooling African American parents. It is the purpose of this essay to explore how a deep concern for their sons undergirds African American parents’ decision to embrace homeschooling. In that respect, based on interviews of homeschooling parents from metropolitan areas of the Northeast and Midwest, homeschooling is portrayed as an ideal panacea to counter the many obstacles faced by African American males. It is said to (1) provide a safe space where healthy notions of African American masculinity can be constructed, (2) protect African American males from possible entanglement in the criminal justice system, and (3) serve as an effective means to teach and shield African American males from biased expectations of teachers, and society at large.*

*Keywords:* African American males; homeschooling; protectionist

Homeschooling, the education of school-aged children at home rather than in public or private school settings (Basham, 2001), has experienced an increase in academic interest over the last decade, as what was once perceived as a marginal development has turned into a significant and growing phenomenon. Indeed, prior to the growth of public schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, home-based education was the only form of education available to most white Americans. But with the onset of public schooling and the move toward compulsory education, brick-and-mortar education became more popular and the norm (Isenberg, 2007). In the case of African Americans of the period, Compulsory Ignorance laws were passed in the 18th century to prevent African people from learning to read and write, yet they surreptitiously defied those laws to set up secret or private learning centers to acquire literacy (Lomotey, 2010).

Modern day homeschooling began to emerge as a substantial alternative to brick-and-mortar education in the 1970s, with origins among religious fundamentalists, members of the political left seeking to establish an alternative society, and simply those in pursuit of a superior

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academic education (Gaither, 2008). Today it is estimated that over two million children are being homeschooled in the United States, as opposed to 300,000 in 1990, thus indicating a dramatic increase over a relatively short period of time (Gaither, 2008; Ray, 2010). Moreover, homeschooling, which grew by 74% between 1999 and 2007, appears to be the fastest-growing form of education in the United States today (Grady & Bielick, 2010). While White students represent about 75% of all homeschooled children, there has been a noticeable surge in African American involvement in the homeschool movement as well (Coleman, 2003; Fulbright, 2006; Ray, 2010). However, there continues to be a general paucity of research on the motivations of homeschooling among African American parents, as the common and implicit assumption seems to be that African Americans' disengagement from the school system is dictated by reasons quite similar to those cited by White Americans, such as quality of education or religious beliefs (Taylor, 2005; Gaither, 2008).

Yet, the very unique experiences of African Americans in this society should be cause for caution as attested, for instance, by the vast literature chronicling the plight of young African American males in the educational system (e.g., Ferguson, 2001; Harry & Klingner, 2006). To make matters worse, there is little indication that this plight is lessening (e.g., Noguera, 2008). It is the purpose of this essay to present the motivational forces leading African Americans to homeschool, and more specifically, to explore how parental concern for sons has led African American families to opt out of traditional brick-and-mortar schooling for homeschooling. While discontent with traditional schooling has been cited by many other groups as the motivation for homeschooling, the concern of African American parents for their sons, this paper contends, brings to the fore a series of disturbing circumstances and preoccupations that are specific to African Americans.

### **The African American Experience in Homeschooling**

Numerous attempts have been made to explore the motivations for homeschooling among American parents (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001; Collom, 2005; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Isenberg, 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). What clearly transpires from a review of this literature is that American homeschoolers do not lend themselves to easy and neat classifications. At best, we arrive at categories that must be broad enough to encompass the multitude of experiences that they claim to capture. Yet, their very broadness undermines their usefulness (Isenberg, 2007). At the heart of this difficulty lies the fact that the homeschooling population's heterogeneity has considerably increased over the past decades. Thus, the "pedagogical" and "ideological" categories which were once proposed by Van Galen (1991, p. 67), and managed to capture the two main groups of homeschoolers in the 1980s – namely, the libertarian political left and the religious right – must be considerably enlarged to include parents who homeschool because of, for example, their dissatisfaction with public and private schools, family needs, and academic concerns. Furthermore, such categories should arguably be able to reflect the motivations of racially under-represented groups, which have been glaringly absent from most of the literature referenced above. Indeed, only a few studies have dealt specifically with African American homeschooling families (McDowell, Sanchez, & Jones, 2000; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Llewellyn, 1996; Romm, 1993). Yet, it is important to recognize, as cogently argued by McDowell et al. (2000), that "Clearly, the decision to homeschool for African American parents contains a great many critical and diverse elements that are simply not a factor for white-Americans" (p. 130). One such critical factor is racism. In point of fact, the

three studies that sought to explore the motivations of African American homeschooling parents unmistakably and consistently identified racism as an important factor in the African American decision to homeschool (e.g., Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Llewellyn 1996; Romm 1993). These findings point to the importance of what we call *racial protectionism*, which we describe more fully below. Our own study on the motivations of African American homeschooling parents is offered as an attempt to fill the conspicuous absence of the African American voice in scholarly discussions about motivations for homeschooling.

That racism plays a significant role in the decision by African American parents to homeschool is not surprising since racism touches many aspects of African American life (Feagin, 2010). This is particularly the case for African American males in the American educational system where they confront institutional and individual racism on many levels. A brief survey of the main and recurrent issues faced by African American males in the K-12 school system is required to understand homeschooling as a viable, if not necessary alternative, for many African American parents.

### **African American Males in the American Educational System**

The struggle on the part of African Americans for a quality and equitable education in America is well documented (Anderson, 1988). This struggle was prompted by the educational inequities that continue to color the lives of young African American males (Noguera, 2008). The following sections of this manuscript highlight four sources of inequity experienced by African American males: (1) low teacher expectations; (2) the over-referral to special education programs; (3) school safety and aggression; and (4) the growing alliance between schools and the criminal justice system. These factors, we argue, have preoccupied homeschooling parents and contributed to their decision to homeschool.

#### **Teacher Expectations**

The literature on teacher expectations and their potential to serve a self-fulfilling role is a well-established in the research area of teacher effects (Brophy, 1983; Jussim & Harber, 2005). First introduced by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) in their classic study *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, where they demonstrated that student's performance was affected by teacher expectations, researcher have since introduced numerous qualifications of their original findings. Factors, for example, such as race, gender, age, socioeconomic status of students have all been shown to influence teacher's expectation (de Boer, Bosker, & van der Werf, 2010; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Sorhagen, 2013). This body of literature has also demonstrated that all things being equal, teachers consistently rate African American children, and African American males in particular, lower in academic ability, which results in lower academic success (Ferguson, 2003; Wood & McLoyd, 2007).

Although there are many roots to this problem, one often cited is the disproportionate racial gap that exists between teachers and students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 85% of all teachers are White, while children of color represent over 40% of the student body (Aud et al., 2011). This percentage is expected to grow significantly in the decades to come. The result is a growing cultural gap that often leads African American students to be viewed as possessing cultural traits that are incompatible with academic success (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003).

Compounding this racial gap is a gender gap that further contributes to biased teacher expectations, as the majority of American teachers are female, while the most vulnerable body of students in the classroom are often male (Sheets, 2005). For example Dee (2004), using test score data from Tennessee's Project STAR, conducted a class-size experiment, which randomly matched students and teachers by race. Results revealed that assigning students to own-race teacher significantly increased their math and reading achievement. Similarly in other studies using a national data set, students where match for both gender and race. Results revealed that student achievement and teacher perception of students were more positive under same-race and same-sex conditions (Dee 2005, 2007).

This racial and gender gap is further heightened by a process of teacher sorting, which is the systematic matching of more qualified teachers with students of relatively high socioeconomic status and achievement levels. This differential allocation of teachers arises from a series of mechanisms, among which is the workings of the teacher labor market, where more affluent communities are able to attract the most qualified teachers because of better pay and superior working conditions. In other instances, sorting occurs within local districts as a result of provisions of collective bargaining agreement, where more senior, and experienced teachers, reserve the right to select their school assignment. The collective result is a system where the best qualified teachers are often siphoned away from the neediest schools (Gawlik, Kearney, Addonizio, & LaPlante-Sosnowsky, 2012; De Luca, Takano, Hinshaw & Raisch, 2009).

In the end, as privileged members of a racist society, White teachers often participate, consciously or not, in the “marking of whiteness as invisible, colorless and as the inevitable norm”, with African American males seen as the ultimate outsider (Solomon, Portelli, Jean Daniel, & Campbell, 2006, p. 148).

### **Disproportionate Placement of African American Males in Special Education**

The crisis of disproportionate placement of African Americans in special education tracks is the inevitable consequence of biased teacher expectations, and it creates a condition that is said to maintain the status quo by preventing African Americans from achieving their fullest potential (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). It is estimated, for example, that nearly 20,000 African American male students are inappropriately classified as mentally challenged, constituting a 300% over-classification of this population (Holzman, 2004). The seriousness of this crisis and the depth of its existence is highlighted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, which has documented a pattern of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education every other year since 1968 (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008).

This disproportionate representation occurs through an effective two-step process of labeling and separation. That is, once a student is labeled, he is then separated from the rest of the student population and placed in a “special education” program (Harry & Anderson, 1999, p. 41). The assumption is that special education students have some disorder that requires specialized instruction or therapeutic intervention, and that these programs will improve their academic performance. However, the positive outcomes are few and their general effectiveness is seriously questioned (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Welner, 2001).

## **The School as an Unsafe Space**

Many African American parents harbor the notion of schools as an unsafe environment to relinquish their children. These fears are fueled by national and local media coverage of violence in schools, which some argue unfairly exaggerates the true level of youth and school related violence (Cornell, 2011). Regardless of the veracity of these media portrayals, recent national statistics on school violence and safety do, nevertheless, give reason for pause. In 2010, students aged 12-18 were victims of approximately 828,000 crimes at school, including 470,000 thefts, and 359,000 violent crimes, of which 91,400 were categorized as serious violent crimes (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2012). In fact, the percentage of high school students who report that they had been threatened or injured with a weapon has increased, and the percentage of students who missed school due to feeling unsafe has also increased (Bliss, Emshoff, Buck, & Cook, 2006), creating what some have called a “culture of fear” (Thompkins, 2000, p. 54).

For some African American males and their families, the violence associated with schools and their immediate environments is particularly acute as data reveal that African American males have a higher probability of being exposed to violence (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Research suggests that such exposure increases the likelihood that males will behave aggressively and commit violent acts as a result (Patton, Woolley, & Hong, 2012).

## **The School to Prison Pipeline**

Finally, a disturbing and growing aspect of the African American male experience in the American educational system is the way that the system serves, for many students, as a gateway into the criminal justice system. With the “War on Drugs” and the “Zero Tolerance” policies of many school districts, the U.S. prison population has dramatically increased in the past few decades. On any given day, it has been estimated that as much as one-third of African American men in their twenties find themselves behind bars, on probation or on parole (Donziger, 1996; Miller, 1996). Indeed, according to Alexander (2010), there are more African American men behind bars or under the watch of the criminal justice system today than were enslaved in 1850. These young African American males are often dropouts of the public school system. It is argued that public schools in many American cities have deteriorated to the point where they operate as institutions of confinement whose primary purpose is not to educate but rather ensure “custody and control” (Wacquant, 2001, p. 108). In effect, in what is referred to as the “pushout crises,” African American males are being pushed out of the educational system and directed down a destructive spiral of failure and confinement (Schott Foundation, 2012, p. 31).

Given this state of affairs, it is no surprise that many African American parents, in collaboration with community leaders and school districts, are seeking alternatives to adequately educate African American males, such as all male schools or rites of passage programs (Watson & Smitherman, 1996). In addition to these actions, our study reveals that a number of African American families are opting to homeschool. As one of our parents in this study so aptly stated, “I’m keeping my son home.”

**Method**

In order to capture the African American homeschooling experience, we conducted 74 interviews across a wide geographical area, stretching along the Mid- and South-Atlantic, and the Midwest during the spring and summer of 2010. In addition to the interviews, this study also relied upon surveys, focus groups, and participant observations of African American homeschooling parents in order to provide a comprehensive view of the African American homeschooling experience. The majority of our subjects were urban, and as shown in Table 1, the largest pool of subjects came from Chicago and its surrounding areas (29.7%), followed by the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia (25.7%), Washington, D.C. (17.6%), New York (10.8%), and Atlanta (8.1%).

Table 1

*Place of Interviews (percentage)*

|                                       |      |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Chicago Metropolitan area             | 29.7 |
| Philadelphia Metropolitan area        | 25.7 |
| Washington DC Metropolitan area       | 17.6 |
| New York City Metropolitan area       | 10.8 |
| Atlanta Metropolitan area             | 8.1  |
| Columbia and Florence, South Carolina | 6.7  |
| Bridgeport, Delaware                  | 1.3  |

*Note.* (N=74)

A snowball sampling procedure and active recruitment from local and national homeschooling associations accounted for a majority of respondents. The interviews consisted of two parts: (1) a survey, which sought demographic and background data for each homeschooling family, (2) followed by a semi-structured, open-ended interview with the participating parent, in which survey items were further explored and elaborated upon by parents. Over 80% of the interviews were conducted with one parent – usually the mother (N = 60) – representing the homeschooling family. The interviews ranged from roughly one and a half hours to two hours in length, and were analyzed using a three-step sequential coding process (i.e., open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) commonly referred to as grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987).

The data analysis was conducted separately by the two authors. We open-coded each transcript three times, each time with a different focus: (1) parental motivation for homeschooling, (2) child centered experiences leading to homeschooling, and (3) daily issues of African American homeschooling. We then met to discuss our findings and to identify areas of agreement and disagreement. Following a series of meetings, we then used the constant comparative method to explore emerging themes, common categories, and subcategories. In other words, we sought connections among the various emergent categories, which in turn became the basis for the emergent theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To ensure credibility, we met independently with a separate research assistant to discuss the emergent theory and expound the selected themes. Upon completion of this process, we came together again for peer debriefing

to further explain the initial theory and ensure that our theory was grounded in the data. We believe theoretical saturation was achieved upon completion of this process.

In producing the emergent themes, steps were taken to triangulate the data. The authors kept extensive journals of the research process, making observational notes of interviews, setting, and interaction, which on several occasions placed us as participant observers of homeschooling events. In addition, three informal focus groups were conducted with homeschooling parents, whereby we kept separate notes, which were later cross-checked during debriefing (Golafshani, 2003). The information presented in this study is largely culled from the surveys and interviews.

Table 2 considers the demographic characteristics of the subjects interviewed. As can be seen there is little variation in the ethnicity of African American respondents interviewed. The majority of our respondents self-identified as native-born African Americans, with only a few self-identifying as foreign born or racially mixed. In terms of family description, the average family consists of 3.2 children and most were raised in a two-parent households (91%).

Table 2

*Indicators of Respondents' Demographic Background (percentage)*

|                                 |      |
|---------------------------------|------|
| <u>Ethnic/Racial</u>            |      |
| Black/African American          | 92.7 |
| Caribbean                       | 2.9  |
| African                         | 1.4  |
| Mixed race                      | 1.4  |
| Hispanic/Latino                 | 1.4  |
| <u>Immigrant origin</u>         |      |
| U.S. born                       | 95.6 |
| Born abroad                     | 4.3  |
| <u>Children characteristics</u> |      |
| Average number in household     | 3.2  |
| Younger than 18                 | 59.8 |
| Aged 18 or older                | 21.9 |
| H.S. graduate                   | 12.9 |
| Aged 25 or older                | 2.2  |
| College graduate                | 3.1  |

*Note.* (N=71)

Table 3 provides a general socioeconomic profile of our homeschooling parents. Overall, they are quite educated, with over 80 percent of the mothers and over 60 percent of the fathers having an undergraduate college degree or more. These figures are significantly higher than the national trend of only 19.4 percent of African Americans with a Bachelor's degree or more in 2010 (Aud et al., 2011). These well-educated parents aside, our figures do suggest a bimodal trend that ought not be ignored. In effect, a substantial number of homeschooling households in our sample have parents with no college degree. Although this trend is higher among fathers – who for various reasons are not as involved in homeschooling instruction as mothers – our data

suggest that almost 20 percent of mothers and close to 40 percent of fathers do not possess a college degree.

Table 3

*Indicators of Respondents' Socioeconomic Background (percentage)*

|  |      |
|--|------|
| <u>Mother's highest level of schooling</u> |      |
| Some high school                           | 0    |
| High school graduate                       | 1.4  |
| Some college                               | 17.4 |
| College graduate                           | 37.7 |
| Some postgraduate                          | 14.5 |
| Graduate or professional degree            | 29.0 |
| <u>Father's highest level of schooling</u> |      |
| Some high school                           | 1.5  |
| High school graduate                       | 7.5  |
| Some college                               | 27.5 |
| College graduate                           | 37.3 |
| Some postgraduate                          | 2.9  |
| Graduate or professional degree            | 22.4 |
| <u>Household income</u>                    |      |
| 4,000 - 24,999                             | 15.6 |
| 25,000-34,999                              | 12.5 |
| 35,000-49,999                              | 10.9 |
| 50,000-74,999                              | 18.7 |
| 75,000 -99,999                             | 17.2 |
| 100,000 - or more                          | 25.0 |

*Note.* (N=71)

Regarding household income, our data reveal broad representation across the income spectrum. A quarter of our subjects are in households with an income of \$100,000 or more, and over 60 percent report an income of \$50,000 or more. These figures leave, however, a substantial portion of our subjects with an income of less than \$50,000 a year. According to national labor statistics, the poverty line for a family of five with three children is \$26,023. With this number as a baseline, we can ascertain that 15.6 percent of our subjects are living under the poverty line and an additional 12.5 percent hover near the poverty line. Consistent with our household income trend, 65.2 percent of our respondents report living in a home they own, but ironically the values of those homes do not trend at the high end of our income scale, as one might expect given the income and education distribution of our sample. Indeed, the values of the homes owned by our sample are fairly distributed across our scale. These figures suggest (1) the historical legacy of racism and discrimination which accounts for the wealth gap between Whites and African Americans, and (2) the way in which segregation moderates homes' values in the American housing market (Massey & Denton, 1993; Pattillo-McCoy, 2000; Shapiro, 2004). Consistent with the distribution of home values, we find our sample living in quite segregated areas. About 40 percent of our respondents live in a neighborhood where over 75 percent of their neighbors are African American, and combined with other markers of segregation, over 50 percent of our



respondents live in a majority African American neighborhood. These data suggest that the African American families we interviewed, despite some indicators of middle-class status, find themselves in segregated urban environments that replicate many of the deleterious conditions of lower income African Americans (Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, African Americans are less likely to perpetuate their middle class-status across generations as recent data have revealed that 45 percent of African American children who grew up in middle class households ended up in the bottom of quintile of the earning distribution as adults, a substantially larger percentage than White middle-class children (Isaacs, 2008).

We stress these precarious dimensions of the African American middle-class to suggest that the parents we interviewed, regardless of class status, are confronted with similar social issues and express similar concerns regarding their sons in the American educational system (Williams, 2006).

### Findings

The open-ended interviews dealt more specifically with African American parental motivations for homeschooling. Parents were asked directly, “What made you decide to homeschool?” Most respondents were quick to provide a response to this question – a question that in most cases had already been answered in the course of the interview. To ensure completeness and some level of uniformity, a list of possible reasons was then read to each respondent, in which case respondents were free to select one or more reasons aligned with their motivations or provide an option that was not on our list.

In response to our query, most parents offered a series of motives, and were rarely motivated by a single factor as shown in Table 4 (below). Among the many reasons given, a concern with the quality of education provided in brick-and-mortar schools was most often mentioned (25%). This finding is consistent with previous research (Gaither, 2008). But, unlike other research on homeschooling, and unique to the African American experience in homeschooling, the second most mentioned motivating factor for homeschooling was a concern with racism (23.9%). In previous articles we dealt specifically with the issue of quality of education and racism as motivators (Mazama & Lundy, 2012).

Table 4

#### *Reasons for Homeschooling (Percentage)*

|                       |      |
|-----------------------|------|
| Quality of Education  | 25.0 |
| Racism                | 23.9 |
| Family Bonds          | 14.8 |
| Religious             | 9.5  |
| Concern for Sons      | 9.5  |
| Financial Constraints | 4.2  |
| Moral - nonreligious  | 4.2  |
| Special Needs         | 3.4  |
| Other                 | 5.5  |

*Note.* (N=71)

We showed how African American parents' inspiration to homeschool their children was often couched as a desire to protect their children from forms of institutional racism, or, as is often the case, a reaction to an egregious racist incident in schools (Mazama & Lundy, 2012). Of particular relevance is the manner in which parental worries about racism were often expressed as distress over the ways African American males were treated in the educational system. Close to 10 percent of our respondents stated directly that they chose homeschooling as an explicit act to protect their sons. In the course of our interviews, however, a much larger portion of our subjects spoke about the negative experiences of their sons in brick-and-mortar schools, or their general concerns about relinquishing their sons to the traditional school system. It became clear that preoccupation for sons was an emergent theme that deserved analysis. Indeed, based on our interviews, African American parents' concern for their sons can be thematically grouped as a preoccupation with (1) the link between schools and the criminal justice system, (2) their son's self-esteem or confidence, (3) the constant battle against teacher bias, and (4) the fear of their son being assigned to special education classes or labeled cognitively disabled.

### **Protectionists: African American Homeschoolers Guarding their Sons**

In previous articles, we have used the term protectionists to describe those African American parents who have chosen to homeschool their children as a measure against the negative outcomes of the educational system (Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2013). These negative outcomes range from the failure of the school system to adequately instruct one's child – the argument presented by African American parents seeking a quality education – to African American parents' preoccupation about the negative impact of direct racism. Presented here are the issues voiced by our subjects related to African American males, which echo many of the themes presented in our literature review.

### **The Unique Challenges Faced by African American Males**

Many of the parents interviewed acknowledge a difference in how the educational system relates to African American boys relative to African American girls. African American parents do not necessarily diminish the challenges associated with raising and educating girls, but they insist that boys present a different set of circumstances far more deleterious in outcome. Fatima, a mother of five boys, living in the Washington, D.C. area, conveys this notion as she discusses the challenges facing African American males by recalling her own experience as a student:

Well...the boys, the African American boys in my class, they were always treated and spoken to with a lot of malice; with contempt sometimes. And I just remember that; I remember I was never treated that way, and the girls were very rarely treated that way, but the African American boys were always treated that way.

Furthermore, many of our parents assert that boys possess a distinct culture that the school system is ill prepared to engage. The energy and the social dynamics that are specific to African American males are at times incompatible with a system couched in White middle-class culture (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Majors & Billson, 1993). Maisha, mother of two boys, also in Washington, D.C. expresses this idea:

[Boys] learn differently and ...they're pretty much not affirmed in a classroom style of teaching that most teachers use. [They] cater more to girls. The whole idea of sitting down and sitting still and writing, and writing, and just the books on the book lists.

In effect, these parents posit a cultural mismatch, which strains the relationship between schools and African American males (Delpit, 1995). From their vantage point the fault lies not in the comportment of their sons, but rather in the school system, that is incapable and unwilling to accommodate what their sons bring to the fore.

### **Low Expectations and Special Education**

The cultural mismatch that African American parents find problematic often reveals itself in the relationship between teachers and African American males. Many parents recount stories of how low teacher expectations or outright negative bias has fueled and reaffirmed their decision to homeschool. Martha, for example, mother of five boys in Philadelphia, tells the story of how she came to homeschool her sons after observing low teacher expectations:

I just thought, you know: all white teachers, all African American kids, and I have boys. It just didn't sound like a great mix. The kids in the school are black, but I didn't think they were given the best of these schools. Let me think of how to explain it...it seemed like they were given the leftovers. It seemed to me that the teachers were coming in to get paid but not necessarily to give their best to these kids. They didn't expect much from the kids. They could care less. The passion and heart for teaching wasn't there, and the students, especially the boys, paid for it. I knew that wasn't for me.

Unfortunately, several African American homeschooling parents have been negatively affected by having to fight against lower academic track assignments for their sons. In a *protectionist* mode, these parents opt out of brick-and-mortar schooling and position themselves as bulwarks against the prevailing norms of the American education system, which as they see, does not have the best interest of their sons in mind. This posture is suggested by the following quote from Shawn, the mother of one boy, in Philadelphia:

We were fighting all the time, and our experience is not just with [my son] alone, but with a lot of other boys and knowing that, typically, they're not placed where they could be, and I'm certain some of that has to do with what I believe is race-based. And what I mean by race-based is where decisions are made. So why aren't African American boys in the accelerated academic program? Why would they be trapped into low-level courses? So that's my concern. So because I look at that, I know that there are decisions that are made based on race and because they're scared of Black boys, I didn't want that for him. I pulled him out knowing that is so typical.

It would be naive to believe that to deny a well-qualified African American child entrance in an accelerated academic track ends there, and that somehow that child will be able to succeed academically, albeit in a lower track. Evidence points to the contrary since a child whose educational needs are not met in regular education is at an increased risk of being referred to special education, thus exacerbating a process of discrimination which leads to a high incidence of "disabilities" label (Harry & Anderson, 1999, p. 37). Accordingly the vigilance that African

American parents must observe regarding low teacher expectations and academic placement is well grounded, as the latter often lead to a spiral of institutional discrimination.

### **The Fear of Prison and a Concern for Violence**

Unquestionably, the most recurring theme to appear in our discussion with African American homeschoolers regarding the education of their sons, centered on the fear of being trapped in the criminal justice system. The parents interviewed were keenly aware of the connection between failing schools and the growing African American male prison population. This knowledge is expressed in several ways. To many of our parents the word “school” was synonymous with jail or prison, implying that one leads to the other, or that they both serve the same function of punishment and control (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001). These sentiments are expressed by Tara, the mother of a young boy, in Philadelphia and Jason, father of two boys, who lives in the Chicago metropolitan area:

*Tara:* Schools are institutions, just like prisons are institutions. Just like insane asylums are institutions. They are there to keep our kids locked up.

*Jason:* So, if we’re going to let our children go to these schools, we’re going to be training them...training them to be future convicts...because I believe schools are so very related to prisons.

When schools are not directly referred to as prisons, they are often perceived as precursors to prisons. Parents are alarmed by the growing collaboration between school districts and law enforcement agencies to create a “schoolhouse to jailhouse track” by imposing severe punishment on seemingly minor infractions (Advancement Project, 2005, p. 7). As one mother asserts, “I’m the mother of a little Black boy. These schools here, at best, turn out idiots. At worst, they turn out criminals.”

### **Homeschooling as a Corrective Measure**

African American homeschooling of males is more than a passive counter measure against a much gendered form of White supremacy, it is also a way to assert agency and assume leadership in shaping the character of a Black male. Indeed, these African American parents assumed a *protectionist* posture (Mazama & Lundy, 2012) as they engage in proactive measures to bring to the fore the type of men they would like their sons to become.

### **Creating Black Masculinity**

Toward that end African American homeschooling parents engage in the delicate task of building a healthy Black masculinity that challenges the narrow and often negative identity of Black males. African American parents often find themselves challenging institutional practices and norms, as well as images and racial myths perpetuated by the media, in order to orient their sons toward a more positive ideal of what it means to be a Black man. As one parent puts it: “I didn’t want [my Black males] to have to feel any of the stereotypes we set out there.”

Homeschooling parents seek to effectively communicate to their sons that academic success is not incompatible with one’s manhood, and that delinquency or displays of violence

and aggression are not viable options. Indeed, researchers discuss a stage in African American male adolescent development where some African American boys feel the need to project the image of a tough angry Black man. These young men believe that in order to be respected, they have to carry themselves in a manner that is intimidating and at times menacing (Ferguson, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1993; Noguera, 2008). Unfortunately, these attitudes and behaviors hold considerable currency within the African American male peer group, and African American homeschooling parents view homeschooling as a mechanism to deter these negative peer group influences and create a psychologically healthy Black male. African American homeschooling parents assemble as many of the resources at their disposal to create an image of Black masculinity that entails academic success and positive self-image, and in the words of Maisha is “authentic”:

I’m really passionate about boys and homeschooling in that my son has an opportunity to be who he is without a lot of outside interference, meaning peer pressure to be this way or that way. I really think that who Zac has developed into now is authentic.

Some parents make an effort to saturate their sons with positive male role models to counter the negative stereotypes and messages that bombard their sons, as in the case of Nadine, mother of four (three of which are boys):

My children have a Black male doctor, and I try in any business we do – they all now have allergies, they have a Black allergist, they have a Black dentist, all men – so I go out of my way to try to put them in front of people who look like them, in gender and in race.

In their attempt to construct a positive image of Black masculinity, the homeschooling parents we interviewed were also preoccupied with shaping their son’s sexuality. For these parents, sexual identity and the appropriate object of one’s sexual desire were perceived as part and parcel of what it means to be a Black man. In short, for these parents Black masculinity entails a Black female counterpart. They wanted their sons to be attracted to African American women and were often leery of interracial sexual contact, which in American society is replete with difficulty (Apel, 2004). These sentiments are expressed by Petra, a mother living in Atlanta:

[My husband] is a great Black man. And, [my son] can learn a lot from his father. I try to instill in him the beauty of Black women: all Black women, but in particular Black women who look like his mother, who are darker in complexion, with natural hair. I try to instill that. He’s going to love who he wants to love. ... But I definitely want him to know that it’s a great thing to love your Black woman.

In the end, homeschooling, according to these African American parents, makes it possible to redefine the purpose of education in a manner that is consistent with their own personal philosophy of life and as an antidote against obstacles faced by African American males. For these parents, the restorative power of homeschooling exists beyond creating Black masculinity, but also as a counter measure to the school-to-prison pipeline, low teacher expectations and bias and, overall, teacher indifference and poor quality education (Mazama & Lundy, 2012, in press).

## Summary and Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to gain insight into the experiences, views, and actions of African American parents who choose to educate their sons at home as a protective measure against the obstacles the latter encounter in many schools. We were particularly interested in highlighting how familiar parents were with the hurdles that African American males face in school, and the purposeful manner in which these parents pursued an alternative educational track for their sons. As with our previous work, this study demonstrates that African Americans' motives for homeschooling cannot simply be subsumed under White motives (Taylor, 2005; Gaither, 2008). In many ways, the motives and concerns more directly speak to the life of African American children.

The concerns expressed in our study were conveyed by African American parents that fall along the socioeconomic spectrum. Regardless of class status, these families were preoccupied, and affected by many of the same social forces that shape the lives of lower class African Americans. Segregation and/or institutional racism make it difficult for African Americans to enjoy the benefits of middle class status. This study re-affirms the largely held sociological belief that as new entrants in the middle class, African Americans are in a tenuous and uncertain position (Pattillo-McCoy, 2004). Institutional and individual racism against their sons has influenced the educational path African American parents have chosen to pursue.

Thus, in sum, this study suggests that African American parents with sons homeschool (1) to provide an alternative (and safe) space where healthy notions of Black masculinity can be constructed; (2) to protect their sons from entanglement in the criminal justice system that often begins in schools; and (3) to effectively teach their sons and shield them from the biased expectations of teachers and the abusive label of 'special needs'.

In addition, regardless of the primary motivation for homeschooling, one must keep in mind that the decision by an increasingly large number of African American parents to take back their children's education is part of the long and rich history of African American parental involvement in the access to, and shape of the academic training and socialization of African American children (Anderson, 1988). Too often, previous research on African American homeschooling has presented it as simply an epiphenomenon of the failure of the American educational system (Taylor, 2005). While such a view may not be incorrect, it nonetheless fails to appreciate homeschooling as the latest phase of the African American struggle for adequate education. After all, there exists a long history of African Americans' deep interest in educational matters. Whether it was during slavery, when enslaved Africans were prohibited to learn to read and write, and risked their lives for doing so, or after emancipation, when newly freed Africans resisted attempts to limit their educational options to vocational training or instruction in segregated schools, African Americans kept insisting on their right to be educated as they saw fit (Anderson, 1988; Lomotey, 2010). More recently in the face of a hostile environment that particularly targets African American males, African American parents have turned to homeschooling to ensure a safe and nurturing space for the future fathers and husbands of the African American community.

## **Future Research and Practice**

It is suggested that future research undertake a longitudinal study of African American male homeschoolers to examine the potential benefits of homeschooling in order to make adequate comparisons to the non-homeschooling population. This method would also allow researchers to better understand the social and psychological development of homeschooled males, as well as the lifespan consequences of homeschooling, as these young men enter college. Future research would also do well to investigate the micro-level dynamics of parent-child relationships in the African American homeschooling context. In particular, how, if at all, do parents communicate messages of masculinity and identity, as well as motivation and overall success to their sons? Also significant would be an in depth assessment of the relationship between parental educational level, income level, residential segregation, and other indicators of wealth and status and the decisions to homeschool young black males. With these research objective in mind, schools should establish policies that bring families back to the center of the educational enterprise. The positive presence of families in schools provide feelings of security and love, which are foundational in the homeschool setting. In effect, norms of acceptable behavior and positive displays of masculinity are reinforced and guided by individuals whose authority go beyond the confines of brick and mortar schools. Black males ought to be mentored, tutored and guided, not solely by school officials, but also by individuals who can reproduce the expectations and norms of the home.

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