

"Acting Black:" What Black Kids Think about Being Smart and Other School-related Experiences

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A question often echoed in popular discourse is, "Do Black kids consider being smart as 'acting White'?" For example, cultural critics such as Bill Cosby and Stuart Buck have brought this discussion to the mainstream media. Scholarly literature has explored this concept through quantitative and qualitative inquiry, e.g., Ogbu¹ and Fryer². Those familiar with Black idioms are aware that some Black people will accuse others of "acting White" usually as a slight against someone who is acting against the best interest of the Black community, or "selling out." Recently, the phenomenon and the psychological connotations of "acting White" have been used to explain Black students' educational values; the achievement gap between Black and White students; and even to influence the type of pedagogy and advising interventions offered to African American students – in particular, African American males.

A Question of Racial Identity. At the core of the "acting White" question is whether deficits in Black students' racial identity is contributing to underachievement. Racial identity refers to Black children's view of themselves in relation to their ethnic and racial group. Many scholars assert that Black children with low levels of racial identity are less likely to achieve in school. Prominent psychologist William Cross postulated that culturally corrupt social and environmental experiences can hamper Black children's racial identity³. A study by Wakefield & Hudley indicated that African American children with positive racial identity and a strong self concept are more academically successful⁴.

As researchers, we are well aware of the persistent educational disparities and the social consequences of high dropout rates, suspensions, underachievement, low college enrollment and disproportionate contact with the juvenile justice system among Black students, particularly Black males. We are also aware of the positive impact of having healthy levels of racial pride. What is less clear however, is whether underachievement among Black students is a culture or a consequence. In other words, the literature has not firmly established whether Black students systematically ridicule peers for studying, or feel like they won't fit in with peers if they do well in school.

For this inquiry we analyzed raw data from the CBS News Monthly Poll⁵. This special topic poll, conducted March 31 to April 9, 2005, surveyed students aged 14 to 24 years on their opinions of school. The sample was nationally representative, and acquired through random-digit dialing and telephone interviews. Of the 1,586 participants, 262 were African American. In addition, we drew complimentary findings

from analyses we conducted for previous studies. Specific datasets cited in this inquiry include: National Crime Victimization Survey - School Crime Supplement (NCVS-SCS) ⁶; and Health Behavior in School-age Children (HBSC) ⁷.

What Black Kids Think about Being Smart

The CBS Poll asked students a range of questions that gauged their perception of being smart and their opinions about smart students (i.e. students who studied hard and received good grades). For Black students, this gave us an opportunity to find evidence in support or against the "Acting White Theory."

In the most pointed question, students were asked, "Thinking about the kids who get good grades in your school, which ONE of these best describes how you see them: 1) cool, 2) normal, 3) weird, 4) boring, or 5) admired?" Response differences between Black males, Black females, White males, and White females were not statistically different, however, at 17% Black males were the most likely to consider such students as "cool." Among other students between 11-12% considered students who make good grades as "cool." The vast majority (about 60%) of all students, regardless of race or gender consider kids who make good grades as "normal." Regardless of race or gender, students rarely considered students who make good grades as "weird" or "boring."

Another question asked, "In general, if you really did well in school, is that something you would be proud of and tell all your friends about, or something you would be embarrassed about and keep to yourself?" Eighty-nine percent of all students said they would be "proud and tell all." At 95%, Black females were the most likely to be proud of doing well in school. At 17%, White males were the most likely to be "embarrassed or keep to self" or report that they "did not know." Corresponding feelings of embarrassment or dissonance for Black males was 10% and for Black females 4%. These differences between genders were statistically significant.

The final question that related to feelings about being smart was, "In general, how would your friends react if you couldn't hang out because you were doing homework or studying for school? Would they 1) be supportive of you, 2) make fun of you or try to disrupt you, or 3) they wouldn't care one way or the other? At 45%, Black females were the most likely to say their friends would be supportive, with Black males and White females tied at 40%. White males were significantly lower. Only 24% of White males reported that their friends would be supportive, with most (65%) reporting that their friends wouldn't care either way. Males were more likely than females to state that their friends would disrupt their studies, however this response represented less than 10% for all race/gender groups.

The CBS News Poll surveyed mostly middle class Black students, however a study of the academic potential of juvenile detainees had similar findings. Among the 1,576 youth detainees, 92.6% reported that they planned to return to school after release. Analysis revealed significant differences between race-gender groups. Black females were the most likely to plan to return to school with 97.1%, followed by White females (92.9%), Black males (89.9%), and White males (85.7%)⁸.

What Black Kids think about College

Although the gap between Black and Whites graduating from high school has narrowed over the last century; the gap between the percent of Black and White people with college degrees in the U.S. population has been expanding almost every year since 1940. In 1940, only 1.42% of Black males had college degrees, compared to 5.8% of White males. In 2007, 15 percent of Black males had a college degree, compared to 31% of White males⁹.

Consistent with other national surveys, the CBS Poll found that most Black students want to go the college. Across races, about 65% of males and 75% of females planned to go to a four year college after graduating from high school. More Black students regardless of gender planned to go to vocational or technical school, and more male students regardless of race planned to go to the armed forces.

When responding to the question, "Would you say most of your friends probably will or probably will not go to college?" Black male and female students were significantly less likely to respond, "will not." Forty percent of Black males and 31% of Black females stated that their friends probably would not go to college, compared to 23% of White males and females. When asked the question, "What do you think your friends would like more: if you go to college, OR if you don't go to college, OR your friends would not care either way?" Black students were more likely to report that their friends want them to go to college. White students were more likely to state that their friends wouldn't care either way.

Several factors were revealed that discouraged Black students from pursuing college. More than one third of all Black students who decided not to attend college stated that they could not afford it. Ten percent of Black males stated that they did not have enough information about college. Fifteen percent of Black females elected not to go to college for "family reasons," compared to zero percent of Black males. Black females were the most likely to report being stressed about college when compare to other race groups.

In the sample of juvenile detainees, more than half of all participants (52%) indicated that they eventually wanted to go to college after graduating from high school.

For both Black and White females, 59% responded that they planned to attend college. For Black males, 45%, and for White males 36% planned to attend college. When assessing future aspirations, the top five career choices for Black male detainees were: (1) athlete; (2) undecided; (3) construction; (4) computer analyst or programmer; and (5) military. For Black female detainees the top five choices were: (1) medical profession including doctors and nurses; (2) beauty industry; (3) lawyer; (4) undecided; and (5) teacher⁸.

What Black Kids Need to be Successful in School

School factors

The CBS News Poll asked students, "In your school, which ONE of the following would do the most to help make your education better: 1) Smaller classes, 2) a safer school, 3) more individual attention from teachers, 4) courses that prepare you for the real world, 5) More help getting into college?" For Black students, Number 1 was "courses that prepare you for the real world" and Number 2 was "more individual attention from teachers."

Corresponding findings from "Breaking Barriers: Plotting the Path to Academic Success for School-age Black Males,"¹⁰ found that "Liking" school and not being "bored" by school appears to be language that is particularly salient to school adaptive patterns for Black males. Two national surveys demonstrated that the more Black males report that they like school, and the less they report being bored by school, the better their educational outcomes. Black males also need to believe that what they are learning is important for their future and that the school work is meaningful. Research findings also revealed that academic failure among young Black males may also be attributed to feeling pressured by school work and feeling that school rules are too strict. Notably, low-achieving Black male students' sense that they "belong" at school was similar to high-achieving Black male students. "Belonging" might be an initial investment in the learning process for low-achieving Black students that could ultimately foster an interest in school.

In a related study, we explored high school African American males' interactions with school counselors and their overall schooling experience¹¹. African American males in the study offered specific recommendations on how to improve their school experiences through curricular and co-curricular interventions, including violence prevention programs, study strategies, test taking skill development, and early academic planning. These findings suggest that African American male adolescents not only have expectations that their teachers and counselors will provide support during their school

experiences, but also have specific ideas about how to navigate the schooling process and who to ask for assistance when needed.

Teachers

The CBS News Poll asked students, "Overall, how would you rate the quality of your school's teachers? Would you say they are excellent teachers, good, fair, or poor teachers?" Not surprising, our analysis found that Black students who rated their teachers as "excellent," were also more likely to report good grades in school. This finding corresponds to results in "Breaking Barriers," whereby across three national surveys, through the findings, a profile of a teacher that was particularly effective in fostering academic growth among Black students clearly emerged. High-achieving Black students reported that their teachers were interested in them "as a person," treated them fairly, encouraged them to express their views and gave extra help when needed. Teachers who were effective also routinely let their students know when they did a good job. Overall, Black students who were successful perceived their teachers to be respectful people who treated them like they matter and nurturing people who builds up their strengths, instead of making them "feel bad" about their weaknesses.

In a more recent study using NCVS-SCS¹², students in schools with less gang activity were more likely to report that teachers care about students, treat students with respect, spend less time punishing students, and were less likely to report that teachers do or say things that make students feel bad about themselves. Black students were significantly more likely to experience disillusionment with their teachers.

In 2003, one of our colleagues, Dr. Irvine, published research that indicated that teachers often have low expectations for Black students even after going through multicultural training¹³. These negative perceptions and attitudes affect academic outcomes for students of color. Providing pedagogy that is culturally relevant and meaningful to African American students is vital to helping students accomplish important academic milestones. Culturally relevant teaching strategies allow students to become more engaged in the subject matter and encourage students to connect school to everyday "lived" experiences. Connecting school to everyday life in turn, leads students to value learning for its intrinsic value and to the development of transferrable skills that benefit the families, schools and our community.

Safety

The CBS News Poll found equally low ratings of "a safer school" for Black and White students. However, analysis of HBSC found that Black students were significantly less prone to feel safe at school when compared to White students. An analysis found a relationship between feeling safe at school and academic achievement for all students

regardless of race. Neighborhood safety also significantly influenced academic success. When responding to the question, “Generally speaking, I feel safe in the area where I live,” Black students who were reported high achievers were more likely to respond, “Always.” However, generally Black students across levels of academic achievement felt less safe than White students.

Our recent analysis of the NCVS-SCS¹², suggested that collectively, students in schools with more violence reported a average GPA of 2.85, compared to students in schools with no gang activity who reported a collective average of 3.15. Therefore, elevating academic standards at the school can be viewed as a strategy for reducing school violence. Students in schools with gang activity were also more likely to report being distracted from doing school work because of other students misbehaving. These findings collectively suggest that, teachers and administrators in schools with problems with violence spend more time confronting problematic students, and may compromise the academic priorities of the school.

Parents

In the CBS News Poll, Black and White students were similar in their ratings of receiving pressure from parents to study. However, Black students were less likely than White students to state that their parents place pressure on them to go to college. In *Breaking Barriers*, findings produced strong evidence that modeling is an important component of academic development among Black males and females. Father’s education, but not mother’s education, had a significant impact on the academic achievement of Black males – but not as much for Black females. The contrary is true for Black females, who demonstrated stronger academic achievement when their mothers had a college degree. Understanding these findings within the context of other ethnic groups provides further insights into possible reasons Black males are underperforming in schools. African-American males were almost twice as likely to have a father who did not complete college as Asian Americans or European Americans.

Another aspect of parenting that had a significant impact on Black students academic progress was a parent’s involvement with school. Parents who helped their kids with school-related problems were comfortable talking to teachers, encouraged their children to do well in school and maintained high expectations had higher performing children. When analyzing similar parenting practices with a separate dataset, the strongest parenting indicators of academic success were holistic factors: (1) Parents who often told children they were proud of them; and (2) Parents who let students know when they did a good job. Interestingly, although probably important for other aspects of

development, restricting children's behavior, such as time spent with friends or watching TV, did not produce significant effects on grades.

Importantly, the effect size for parent factors specifically on academic success was smaller in general than the effect size for school-related factors such as perception of school and relationship with teachers. In other words, a good school has a greater impact on success than academically inclined parents.

Conclusion

From these analyses of relevant research and large national datasets, we can conclude that the "acting White" theory for Black education is more fodder for cultural critics, than a construct that will advance any meaningful solutions for academic achievement gaps. Regardless of race or gender, grade school students admit to some condescending attitudes toward working hard in school and smart kids.

In many ways, White males were the most forthright about being apathetic toward educational values, which is likely attributed to having less of a need for impression management due to having no stereotype threat. For Black people in general, the context of "acting White" could be primarily a function of satire and sarcasm, and have more to do with styles of dress, communication nuances, music preferences, and a particular swagger that is independent of intellectual aptitude.

Although we find no research evidence of widespread coercion of students for studying or "acting white," even a small percentage of students who systematically target, bully, and intimidate other students who are trying to progress in school can be disruptive to the school environment. In many urban school districts, where problematic students reside in neighborhoods with higher rates of violent crime, predatory attitudes among students can have more serious consequences. Regardless of the motive, "acting White" or otherwise, stakeholders who are interested in creating a safe learning environment for Black children should avoid sensational sound bites and implement targeted strategies that harness Black students' academic resilience.

Overall, education is most effective when it promotes positive school-related growth experiences, with particular emphasis on teacher-student relationships, didactic learning and emotional support. Positive parent-child communication, including parents expressing praise, helping with homework, and cooperative parenting arrangements, also promotes academic success among Black students. It is critical that academic support and resources are provided to all students, particularly those from low income areas. In addition, through civic engagement, volunteerism and sports, academic functioning and peer relations can be improved. Most importantly, we must advocate for policy that reduces racial disparities in income and increases equity and inclusion in education.

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