The Success of African American Students in Independent Schools

By: *Edith G. Arrington, Diane M. Hall, and Howard C. Stevenson*

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS — at the request of concerned independent school educators, and with funding from independent schools and a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health — we've conducted extensive research[1] on the experiences of African-American students in independent schools (see sidebar at the bottom of this page for the genesis of this project). Based on this research — which we've named the Success of African-American Students (SAAS) in Independent Schools project — there are three main points we would like to share about the experience of black students in independent schools:

1. Promoting black students' connection to the school community and their emotional health is key to their academic success.

2. Schools not only socialize students academically, they also socialize students racially.

3. The experience of racism is a reality for black youth that can compromise the quality of their school experience and tax their emotional resources.

EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

We begin with our assertion that *promoting black students' connection to the school community and their emotional health is key to their academic success.*

Our research (here and elsewhere) indicates that, for black students, success is best defined by a strong sense of connection to the school community; a positive sense of self across contexts, but especially in the school; social and emotional health; and a racial identity that would serve as a resource as they develop, but particularly when students encounter racism. In our interviews with students for the SAAS project, it was also clear that their experiences in these areas varied.

When we measured the students' self-esteem across the home, school, and peer contexts — all three areas being important contexts of socialization for youth — students reported above average levels of self-esteem in all areas with the highest levels of self-esteem reported in the home environment. There was a statistically significant difference[2] between the students' self-esteem at home and at school, with school self-esteem being lower.

75% of the students said they had to make special efforts to fit into their school communities;

82% reported that they had had negative experiences at their schools; and

40% did not believe that the school treated all students the same.

Students assessed the climate of their schools by responding to a number of questions about learning satisfaction, teacher support, school fit, and perceived quality of education. On average, student responses to the school climate questions were positive. For example, a clear majority

reported that they had social and cultural opportunities at their schools (64 percent) and that they were satisfied with the quality of education they received at their school (85 percent). Fifty-six percent said that teachers care for students, and an overwhelming majority said that the education they received at their schools would prepare them for college and life (91 percent).

Yet, while student responses to most of the school climate questions were positive, there were statistically significant differences between the students' reports of school fit and their reports of learning satisfaction, teacher support, and quality of education, such that reported school fit was lower than students' reports in any of the other areas. Three-quarters of the students said they had to make special efforts to fit into their school communities; 82 percent reported that they had had negative experiences at their schools; and 40 percent did not believe that the school treated all students the same.

When we explored the students' psychological sense of school membership (PSSM), the results were similar to what was found with school climate. PSSM is the extent to which students feel that they belong in their school and are deemed to be respected and contributing members of the community. The average response of students in regard to PSSM was moderately high. For example, 70 percent of the students reported that there was a teacher or adult they could talk to in the school, 72 percent reported that other students liked them the way they were, and 82 percent believed that people in the school knew that they were capable of doing good work.

Similar to the school climate results, while black students' overall PSSM was moderately high, there were areas in which their connection to the school community was not strong at all. Sixty-seven percent reported that they had, at one time or another, wished they were in a different school, 70 percent believed that it was hard for people like them to be accepted at their school, and 62 percent thought they did not belong in their school.

Although levels of emotional distress were low for the black students in our study, relationships did exist between distress and self-esteem, school climate, and PSSM. More specifically, as emotional distress increased, esteem at home, with peers, and especially in school decreased, as did perception of the school climate and PSSM. In terms of anger expression, when distress increased, anger control decreased and anger suppression and anger acting out increased. Only anger control is related to self-esteem for students, with higher anger control related to higher levels of peer, home, and school esteem. More positive evaluations of the school climate and stronger PSSM are related to higher levels of esteem across all areas, but particularly so in relation to school esteem.

There is no simple answer to the question of how black students are doing in independent schools. It is true that relationships with teachers and peers, the resources that exist within the school, the preparation for college admission and success, and training for future endeavors are all valued by black students. However, there are some aspects of independent schools that leave a number of students feeling at times as if they do not fit into their school environments and with a tenuous connection to the school community in some areas. We believe that black students in independent schools can feel both connected and disconnected to their schools. This is because they encounter people and resources that affirm them within the school at the same time that they confront challenges to their sense of self and community. Promoting black students' connection to the school community will require continued work to affirm students while addressing the existing challenges they face. Our research indicates that schools need to better explore how race is addressed in schools and how students experience racism. In discussing these challenges we

move onto our second point — *that schools not only socialize students academically, they also socialize students racially.*

RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

In the introduction to their book *Visible Now: Blacks in Private School*, Slaughter and Johnson assert that "all children carry the culture of their communities and families into their schools" (p. 5). In a truly multicultural school, students carrying the culture of their community and family to school would not be an issue, since the cultures of all racial and ethnic groups would already be represented and respected in the school. However, the multiracial composition of the United States has not often translated into schools where there is racial or cultural diversity among students. In the case of independent schools, the most recent statistics on the racial composition of the schools in the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) indicates that approximately 82 percent of students are white, 5 percent are black, and 12 percent are other students of color (NAIS, 2000). The faculty and administration of these schools is predominantly white as well. Given the racial composition of independent schools, the school context for black youth is *racially dissonant.*[3]

Racial dissonance becomes even more meaningful when we focus on the broader context of *whiteness* that exists in predominantly white schools and how it relates to socialization. In school, youth learn what is expected of them in their roles as students and as citizens in the larger world. In independent schools, the majority of students are white and a great deal of economic resources are available in order to prepare students to enter into places and positions of power and prestige. Consequently, whiteness and privilege will shape the rules concerning what is appropriate behavior, which attributes are valued more than others, and how people are supposed to interact with one another in and out of the school community.

As members of groups that are not advantaged in the same way whites are socially and economically, black students and other students of color in independent schools benefit from acquiring the academic and social knowledge that will position them for success in college and future careers. Connecting with possible future leaders in society, and, more importantly, potentially becoming one of these future leaders are other advantages of attending independent schools. However, by attending independent schools, black students must also grapple with implicit and explicit messages that the community they represent is not as valued in school as is the majority community.

Addressing the latter concerns becomes complicated in schools where teachers and administrators are ambivalent about how they should deal with racial and cultural diversity. From our interviews with white teachers, it seemed clear that, in the interest of treating all students equally, many of them don't want to focus on racial and cultural diversity. But, ultimately, this view tends to trivialize diversity as being something that is just "skin deep," thereby sending the message to students that since "we are more alike than different" there is no need to discuss race and diversity. These messages perpetuate the "myth of sameness" (Hardy, 1989), which discourages a critique of how race may impact who is deemed to be successful in school, how school may be experienced differently by students based on their community membership, and what members of the entire school community learn about people different from themselves. If no one challenges the myth of sameness when there is evidence that real differences based on race exist within the school, it is harmful for all members of the community.

We cannot overstate how important it is to be cognizant of the messages that students and adults in the school community convey about race. These messages have an enormous influence on shaping the learning and social environment for black students. This leads us to the last of the major points we want to emphasize — *the reality of race and racism for black youth*.

RACE AND RACISM IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Whether it was through our interviews with students or information gathered from surveys, it was clear that race and racism matter for black youth in and out of school. Racial identity and racism[4] surfaced as topics of discussion in nearly all of our interviews and were significantly related to a number of different indicators of success in our analysis of the survey data.

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In terms of racial identity, almost all of the students who participated in our research project viewed the black community and their membership in it in a positive way. There was more variability in terms of how important being black was to students and how they believed other people evaluated the black community. In fact, our research clearly indicates that black students will engage with race in different ways because of their unique characteristics, developmental history, and experiences across social contexts such as the family and neighborhood. As students get older, race and racism can play larger roles in their school experiences.

Along with their racial identity, students also discussed encounters they had with racism in their schools in many of our interviews. Very few students described dealing with crude expressions of racism, such as being called a racial epithet or hearing a racist joke, and none described any physical altercations motivated by racism. The questionnaire we used that focused on racism asked students about their experience with any of approximately 40 events or situations that could occur at school, in public, on the job, or when hearing racist statements. Students reported that, on average, they encountered approximately half of the events or situations over the last year at least once. Some of the most relevant events and situations encountered include: being followed while shopping (47 percent), believing that white people act surprised at their intelligence or hard work (43 percent), people thinking students will act out their stereotypes of how they think a black person is supposed to act (school sports, style of dress, speech, etc.) (41 percent), and feeling that it is necessary to change their speech or appearance when around white people (40 percent). While some of these events occur outside of the school (*e.g.*, being followed while shopping), the other events can and do occur within the school setting.

In response to their experiences of racism, students reported feeling angry and strengthened most often (particularly in school and in the public realm). Feeling strengthened as a response to racism may seem counterintuitive. However, students who have been proactively racially socialized by parents and other adults so that they have coping responses ready when they

encounter racism may report being strengthened because they were able to deal with racism in a healthy way. Indeed, across all of the domains we assessed, students reported

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"speaking out" or "proving them wrong" as the coping responses they used most often, particularly in school or when they heard racist statements. Being able to take a stand of some sort when confronting racism may serve to empower students and ultimately strengthen them. In that regard, proactive racial socialization would be invaluable for students.

The black students' experience of racism in and out of school is important to address because, for a number of students, racism adversely affects their emotional and psychological coping within school. As students report more school-related racism, their sense of connection to the school community, or PSSM, and evaluation of the school climate decreases. Conversely, their emotional distress and anger expression (specifically, anger acting out) increases. Similar relationships hold for racism experienced in and out of school, such that the more students reported racism in school, in public, or the more they heard racist statements over the last year, the lower their school self-esteem.

From our interviews with teachers, we have gleaned that many do not view discrimination as a problem that their students currently face in school. And while students described situations that we felt were racism related, some students did not name the experiences as racism. We think the hesitance on the part of some teachers and students to see racism in the schools is likely due to their holding definitions in which racism is thought only to be the more overt and crude types of discrimination.

Racism in today's society often takes a subtle and more covert format, involving stereotyped thinking and diminished or lowered expectations for black students. Given the anxiety around the topics of race and racism, the tendency for some in the school community to deny or downplay racism is understandable. However, it is detrimental for students, and especially so for black students — for whom race is central to their identity — to not have an opportunity or vocabulary to name, discuss, or change their reality. Discomfort on the part of adults or students in the school community in discussing racism will not prevent students from having these experiences. Indeed, discomfort and silence in regard to racism will unfortunately make the students' ability to cope effectively with racism more difficult, since students will not have the resources to draw upon when they need them.

Moreover, given our assertion that schools are racially socializing environments, not talking about race and racism does send messages to the members of the school community. Not discussing race and racism, particularly when it is in the format of denying their relevancy, also leaves notions of privilege and whiteness unexamined. As a result, black students and all members of the school community are left without the tools to work through the role race and racism play in their school experiences. Race and racism do matter in how students experience

their schools, and it is only by directly addressing how they matter that their negative impact can be reduced.

PROMOTING THE SUCCESS OF BLACK STUDENTS

So what do we suggest that the independent school community do to promote success for black students, given our assertions and findings? We have a number of recommendations.

First, it is necessary that schools recognize the diversity among black students in their community. Acknowledging that black students are diverse in and of themselves should alleviate some of the reliance on stereotypical thinking, and the bias that results from it that students report encountering in and out of school. This is important to address because black students who have more personal experiences with racism in and out of school have a lower sense of school membership and school esteem.

Second, without understanding and examining how the contexts of whiteness and "niceness"[5] surround and silence race dialogue, school programming for students of color is likely to fall short of reducing the emotional distress they experience in their schools. To reduce stigmatization, honest and open discussions must occur on whiteness, the power and privilege that are related to it, and the expression and experience of racism within independent schools. Since the wider sense of community for all students and adults is compromised when racism is left unexamined, conversations on race and racism should be held across and among the various constituencies in the school community. Talking about race and racism is not something only black people and other people of color should do. While interracial dialogue that directly addresses race, racism, and privilege may be difficult to engage in, it is necessary that these conversations take place. These discussions would represent proactive socialization around race and help promote the emotional health and school connection of black students.

Third, for black students and other students of color to feel as though their communities are as valued as the majority community within their schools, the numbers of students of color *must* increase. It is necessary for schools to bolster or remain committed to recruitment and retention efforts so that the number of black students and other students of color within independent schools becomes a viable force. In this way, students from all communities will have a voice in their schools.

Finally, the identification of programming to cultivate stronger connections to the school community for black students and to enhance the emotional health of students should be a school goal. This is particularly necessary for students who are more aware of the dynamics of race, racism, and privilege in their schools since these students have lower levels of PSSM and evaluations of their school climates than do other students. Schools can do this in a number of ways, but we believe that organizations where youth from the same or similar racial communities can come together and be emotionally reinforced within the school setting, or affinity groups, are especially effective.

There are multiple implications for black students' overall development and in-school experiences when they attend predominantly white schools. Problems arise for black students in these schools when the significance of race is denied or downplayed or when there is no acknowledgment of the messages sent about race and how it impacts success in the school community. Students must still learn, grow, and thrive within this atmosphere, and, as such, independent schools have a responsibility to pay attention, not only to the academic achievement of black students, but to tend to the emotional and structural challenges these students face daily.

It is our belief that the positive development and mental health of black students ought to be viewed by every independent school as an equally meaningful barometer of success as are these students' PSAT/SAT scores, grades, athletic accomplishments, or admission to the "right" colleges. Anything less would be a failure to provide black students with the education they deserve.

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Around the time that Howard Stevenson, an African-American psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE), was consulting with the family of an extremely bright African-American male perceived as "difficult" at the independent school he was attending, a group of independent school educators, administrators, and others concerned with the experience of African-American males in their schools was beginning to form. This group became the African-American Boys Coalition (AABC), and its focus of concern was the disproportionate numbers of black boys who were viewed as having either academic or behavior problems, or who were leaving the schools they attended — either on their own accord or at the schools' request.

For the most part, AABC members were faculty, administrators, and staff of color who had keen insight into the experiences of black males in their schools. As the AABC became more active and vocal in its advocacy for black male students, it came to the conclusion that research should be undertaken to address the demands from the various constituencies that wanted more than the testimony of the AABC that black males were experiencing difficulty in their schools.

THE STORY BEHIND
THE RESEARCH

Having worked with Howard Stevenson on other clinical and research projects involving the well-being of African-American males, some members of the AABC believed that its advocacy efforts would be informed and supported by working together on a research project. The Success of African-American Males (SAAM) in Independent Schools was created from this collaboration. The schools that collaborated with the Penn team on SAAM were generous enough to provide some financial support to help them get the project up and running. SAAM quickly became SAAS — the Success of African American Students (SAAS) project — once the research team received additional funding from a federal source. More resources allowed the work to include both boys and girls, and support the collection of longitudinal data over several years.

From speaking with members of the AABC and drawing on the experience of various members of the research team, we compiled a collection of questionnaires and created a

set of interview and focus group questions that we thought addressed the different facets of the experience of black students in independent schools. Student perspectives were at the heart of our research endeavors, but we also believed hearing what parents, teachers, diversity coordinators, and alumni had to say was important to deepen our understanding of the many factors that contributed to students' success. In that vein, we planned to conduct focus groups with parents, teachers, and alumni; ask parents to complete survey questionnaires; and interview teachers and administrators.

Moving from the planning stages into actually conducting interviews and focus groups or collecting surveys was easier said than done. Despite the similarities among the schools, each was unique in terms of the culture of its community and how diversity was (or was not) addressed. While there always appeared to be a willingness to address diversity in its broadest sense in the schools that were a part of SAAS, we continued to encounter resistance to the work. As opposed to our previous work in public schools where resistance was more overt, and therefore easier to identify, in independent schools it seemed that there was a systematic "niceness" that masked the hesitancy of the schools to fully engage with the research. It took longer for the Penn team to read through this niceness and understand that while many of the people we encountered in the schools were pleasant to us and spoke encouragingly about our work, we were still not making the progress we had hoped.

We mention all this because an analysis of the process of working with these independent schools and their various constituents says a great deal about the sensitivity schools have toward diversity and racial issues in school. There were members of the different school communities who did not view work on SAAS as a priority or see why the work was necessary. Additionally, a significant number of parents of black students chose not to participate or have their children participate in the SAAS project. From information we gathered from families, we learned that some parents were concerned that SAAS would focus on their children and their supposed problems and not explore the role the school played in their children's adjustment. Other parents expressed a concern that, by participating in SAAS, their children would be stigmatized or suddenly made aware of racial differences.

With the help and support of AABC members and parents, we were able to learn from the challenges we encountered along the way and successfully complete many of the goals of the SAAS project. We conducted individual interviews with students at three of the four schools and with teachers at two schools. We held focus groups with alumni at three schools, parents at three schools, and teachers at one school. Due to some of the previously mentioned challenges, we were not able to collect surveys from students at all four schools simultaneously in the first few years of the project. After we addressed the challenges, we were able to collect surveys from students and parents across all four schools for two consecutive years.

— Edith G. Arrington, Diane M. Hall, and Howard C. Stevenson

Authors' note: To some extent, a As outsiders, we were starting with blank slates about the way the independent school community worked. We had to learn to push aside whatever preconceived notions we held about independent schools. We could only effectively do this with the help and guidance of the students (current and former), faculty and administrators, parents, and

especially the members of the AABC across all the schools in which we have worked. For their help we are sincerely grateful.

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NOTES

[1] A note about the sample: Qualitative data is culled from individual interviews with 65 male and female students in grades 6-12 and focus groups with upper-school students (6-8 students per group). Quantitative data is from two waves of data collection. In the first wave, 109 students in grades 5-12 completed survey questionnaires. There were 59 female and 50 male students. In the second wave of data collection, 122 students completed survey questionnaires. Of these students, there were 54 male and 68 female students.

[2] All of the mean differences and correlations reported throughout this discussion are statistically significant at the .05 probability level.

[3] Gray-Little & Carels (1997) define "racially dissonant" school contexts as school environments where a student's racial group makes up 20 percent or less of the student body. By this definition, independent schools are clearly racially dissonant contexts for black students and other students of color.

[4] We define racial identity as how students see themselves as members of the black community, their understanding of what other people think of black people, and the meaning that race holds in their lives (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, (1998). Our definition of racism is the expression of prejudice and discrimination on an interpersonal level so that it is subjectively

experienced by individuals (McNeilly, Anderson, Armstead, Clark, Corbett, Robinson, Pieper, & Lepisto, 1996).

[5] In independent schools, we discovered a systematic "niceness" that masked the hesitance of the schools to fully engage with the research. It took a long time for us to read through this niceness and understand that, while many of the people we encountered in the schools were pleasant to us and spoke encouragingly about our work, we were still not making the progress we had hoped. This same niceness manifests itself in a desire not to discuss the hard issues of race and racism in many schools.

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