Published on *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education* (https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu)

VISIBLY INVISIBLE: THE REALITY OF FIVE BLACK BOYS IN A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

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"A little over a year ago, I was engaged in conversation with a friend and colleague. He asked me the following question: 'If I brought a 70-year old illiterate man to you, could you teach him to read?' My answer was yes for I had taught reading to beginning readers. He asked the same question referring to a forty-year old man, and my response was yes again. He asked me the same question a third time pertaining to a teenager, and I said, 'Yes, of course.' My colleague's final question was, 'Then why can't our African American males read in our public schools?' I did not have a response…" (Fashola, 2003, p. 375).

- The overall mean achievement scores for Black male students are lower than those of all other groups in the basic core subject areas (Reed, 1988).
- Black males are more likely than other groups to be classified as mentally retarded or suffering from a learning disability (Noguera, 2003).
- Black males are more likely to be placed in special education classes than they are in gifted and talented classes (Reed, 1988).
- Black males are more likely than other groups to be suspended or expelled from school (Noguera, 2003).
- Black males are at the top of almost every measure of school failure, including dropout rates; absenteeism/truancy; suspension and expulsion; and low academic achievement (Garibaldi, 1992).

In a study of the New Orleans public schools, African American males represented 43% of the school population, while accounting for 58% of the non-promotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, 43% of the dropouts, and only 9% of the gifted and talented (Cooper & Jordan, 2003). This is not an anomaly, but a daily reality for African American males in the inner city. The few who do graduate from America's public schools often possess only marginal levels of literacy and are frequently ill-prepared for college and/or employment. In fact, African American males are denied equal educational opportunity at such alarming rates that some writers have dubbed them an endangered species. The societal ramifications of this systemic non-education have lead to a proliferation of research studies addressing the tragedy of being young, Black, and male in America.

The current study attempts to engage with this issue by first stepping away from the framework within which teachers, politicians, and academics have situated the problem - that of society's expectation of the five D's: "dumb, deviant, disturbed, disadvantaged, and dysfunctional" (Cooper & Jordan, p.383) and seeks instead to understand and probe the (counter)identities African American males assign themselves when not being forced to answer the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (Du Bois, 1903).

Stevenson (2003) suggests that in order to progress, young Black males must be offered ways of thinking above and beyond their current dilemma and taught to refuse to accept definitions of themselves within a paradigm that seeks their self-destruction. Thus, this study seeks to understand the mechanisms by which African American male adolescents situate themselves within or without the paradigm of deviance and the implications this holds for successful academic interventions.

Literature Review

Recently, Urban Education published a two-part special edition dedicated to the education of African American males. Contributions to the series explored a variety of educational, psychosocial, and economic factors that depress the achievement of Black male students. This section will briefly summarize portions of that series, as well as an additional publication by Dr. Howard Stevenson, Jr. (2003).

Cooper and Jordon (2003) locate the problem of Black male underachievement within the schools themselves, charging that public schools create the sense of alienation that many Black male teens experience in educational settings. They suggest that in order to be successful, Black male adolescents must be able to see themselves as academically and socially competent, an almost impossible feat in schools that reflect and reinforce societal perceptions of Black male deviance, deficiency, and criminality. Thus, Cooper and Jordon promote a comprehensive school reform model that hinges upon altering school norms; creating new school cultures based on smaller, multicultural learning communities; and increasing the representation of Black male teachers to serve as role models. These reforms are in addition to the more general recommendations of changes in

curriculum/teaching practices and an improved professional development agenda. Their proposal centers upon the belief that school norms and culture are driven in part by beliefs about academic ability and intelligence. Thus, fundamental shifts in how the education endeavor is structured and organized (and thus in how it is conceptualized) will ultimately change the way teachers teach and students learn, hopefully forever eradicating the deficit model.

Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer (2003) provide quantitative support for the effects of negative school climate asserted by Cooper and Jordan (2003) and seek to identify in their study whether African American males employ reactive coping strategies (bravado attitudes) in response to negative social and educational experiences. The participants in the study were 219 African American males in the 8th, 9th, and 10th grades from impoverished and low-income backgrounds. The youth were asked to complete three measures: 1) the Black Male Experience Measure (BMEM) which assessed Personal Negative Inferences and Personal Positive Inferences of Black male experiences in public places; 2) a derivation of Mosher and Sirkin's (as cited in Swanson, et al, 2003) machismo measure to assess bravado attitudes; and 3) a revised Scale of Teacher Expectations of Black Males (STEBM) to explore perceptions of teachers' expectations of their students' academic potential. Among other things, Swanson et al. found the highest predictors of bravado attitudes to be Personal Negative Inferences and low Perceived Positive Teacher Expectations, suggesting that when Black male adolescents do not see their school environment as supportive of their individual goals and development, they may cease to regard school as a place to receive positive reinforcement for academic success. In their conclusion, these researchers highlight the importance of training teachers to create supportive, affirming atmospheres for Black male adolescents.

The recommendations of these two articles find a degree of expression in the PLAAY (Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression) project of Howard Stevenson, Jr. (2003). Stevenson's PLAAY project incorporates the premises that environment, relationship, expectations, perceptions, and paradigms play a major role in the crisis of Black male teens. In confronting this crisis, Stevenson explored the utility of racial socialization in promoting the development of positive coping strategies among Black male adolescents with histories of aggression.

Stevenson's (2003) PLAAY project offers a unique perspective on the plight of African American males, which he identifies as Catch 33. Catch-33 reflects an awareness of racism as historic, systemic, routine, and emotionally debilitating, and life in such a system as an unending procession of Catch-22 situations. In Catch-22, racism occurs based on one's efforts (damned if you do), and racism occurs based on your presence (damned if you don't). In Catch-33, there is prolonged exposure to racism despite your efforts, presence, or talents (just damned). While other studies explore ways in which schools, teachers, and society can avoid placing young Black males in Catch-33 positions, the PLAAY project explores ways in which young African American males can be taught to confront, challenge, and ultimately reject the Catch-33 framework.

The suggestion that African American males must actively confront and reject, rather than merely react to, the labels imposed upon them informs my study. If confrontation of labels is possible, the question arises, to what extent are African American males already confronting - rather than (re)acting to - these labels? Thus, my study seeks to shift the focus of the discussion from the actions of schools and society and the maladaptive reactions of Black males, to an investigation of the ways in which Black youth in these situations reject the labels of deviance and redefine themselves in their own terms. By reframing the discussion from one of reaction to one of confrontation, this study seeks in its own way to reject the foundational premises of the deficit model that feeds the discourse on the education of Black males.

Research Questions

In its earliest form, this study took quite a different approach to challenging the premises of the deficit model as applied to Black males. The original research questions dealt with the discovery of the informal literacies of African American males in formal and informal school settings and began with assumptions of literacy rather than the assumptions of illiteracy. However, as I sought to investigate the ways in which Black male teens defined or redefined literacy, I found them more engaged in defining and redefining themselves in an ongoing confrontation with the labels imposed upon them. In observing this confrontation, I became aware of the fact that however much researchers lament the imposition of the five-D expectation on Black males, Black male teens themselves ascribe very different meanings and weights to these concepts. In fact, in many ways their constructions of what they are facing reflect subjective "folk" theories of their labels that are seldom addressed in the research literature.

In short, there has been much investigation of how Black male adolescents respond to expectations of being "dumb, deviant, disturbed, disadvantaged, and dysfunctional" as if these were objective, concrete concepts. This study seeks to problematize this assumption on a very small scale by asking how labels such as "poor reader" are constructed by the Black male adolescents in this study. Second, it was observed that in the context of the reading class, several of the young Black boys were actively engaged in resisting these labels and redefining themselves outside the paradigm of deviance, while others sought to redefine deviance. This led to the second major research question of how these teens confront and/or acquiesce to negative labeling in their attempts to establish their identities in a relatively new setting - the reading class.

Methods

Setting:

This study was conducted in the 9th grade of a local inner city public high school housing grades 9-12 in a predominantly low-income African American neighborhood. The red and gray brick building spans an entire city block, with an off-limits parking lot in the front and a smaller, frequently filled visitors' lot in the rear. The interior walls of the school are off-white in color and inset with rows of tall tan lockers. The floors of the school are made of wide squares of black tile that are dulled from use and lightly powdered with dust. Along several of the walls, far above eye-level, inspirational murals provide splashes of color, depicting African proverbs and African Americans engaged in a variety of activities from sports to computer programming. The high arched entrances to the stairwells are also colorful; their splashes of dark green and red paint provide a nice contrast to their dim interior.

The 9th grade academy is located on the third floor and houses a student body of about 300 kids (primarily of African Ancestry), an African American female social worker, a European American male social worker assistant, the academy director (an older African American male) and a multiracial cadre of teachers. The students have four core classes (Algebra II, Physical Science, History, and English I) of 70 minutes each that meet five days a week between hours of 8:00am and 3:00pm. Though some electives meet at 7:30 in the morning, none are offered during the school day. Each student is required to wear a uniform of tan Docker pants and navy blue (boys) or white (girls) shirts.

I selected this site for my study for several reasons. First, I am interested in the education of Black males from low-income families in inner city public schools; for several years, I taught in a middle school population with students from similar backgrounds. Many of the Black males I taught had reading difficulties that were impossible to remedy completely before they entered 9th grade. As a result, they carried these difficulties with them into high school. I often think about how my students fared in the high school setting with minimal reading skills and wished that I had been able to support them in that endeavor. Thus, in choosing a site for my research study, I rationalized that though I could not directly scaffold the reading skills of my former middle-schoolers, I could scaffold the reading skills of boys quite similar to them - 9th grade adolescent males from lower socio-economic backgrounds attending an under-resourced public school. I began with the closest, most convenient location that fit that description and which offered me potential access to this target population.

Access, Role, and Ethics

Ultimately, my desire to work with Black male adolescents in and around reading affected my access to this site. As I had suspected, many young Black males had arrived at high school with their reading difficulties intact, and this school, like many others, found itself unable to provide the necessary remediation. My request to be allowed to create a reading tutorial that would function as the site of my qualitative study was instantly embraced, with no questions asked other than how many and what type of students I wanted and when I wished to work with them. I requested students who were identified by teachers and administrators as having a low reading proficiency coupled with behavioral issues. The school social worker provided me a list of potential participants, and I interviewed each of them to request their participation in the study. My final group consisted of five 9th grade African American males between the ages of fourteen and fifteen.

Though I did not wish to study the students without in some way making a contribution to their future school success, my status as tutor, former teacher, and adult African American female complicated the definition of my role as a researcher. Each of these identities had authoritarian roots that greatly influenced the type of information the students were willing to share with me and the degree to which they confided in me. At the same time, as the only adult in a room of African American males with identified behavior problems, I could not totally abdicate authority, nor could I ever be accepted as a true co-participant due to the manner of their participation.

Ultimately, I chose to present myself to these students as an advocate, as someone interested in understanding and supporting who they were, regardless of what they were labeled to be. Moreover, I sat down with each boy individually and requested his participation in the reading program, expressing my desire to work with him, but allowed each individual to choose whether or not he wished for my advocacy. As a result, the boys and I entered into the tutorial contract by mutual consent, allowing for a certain degree of parity in an otherwise vertical relationship. We were all volunteers, and that fact created spaces of negotiation around issues of authority and power. Looking back, I wonder if my defining myself in this way (as an elected advocate) created an unusual atmosphere for the boys, one in which they were not merely at liberty to be themselves, but where they had the opportunity to actually recreate themselves if they so chose, for my queries resulted in more instances of self-definition than of literacy discussion.

Either way, both my role and their responses created an ethical dilemma: how would I handle the potential tension between my predisposition (as their advocate) to view and present these young men in the best possible light and my ethical obligation (as a researcher) to present them in the most accurate light? In dealing with this tension, I attempted to juxtapose the constructions students place upon their behavior and achievement with the constructions teachers place upon the same, tying the two to the "both-and" framework of African American psychology and resisting the use of the either/or dichotomy. Thus, I did not view the behaviors of the students as falling into the categories of normal vs. abnormal or good vs. bad. Rather, as Stevenson (2003) suggests, I strove to adopt an ideological framework which allowed student behavior to be simultaneously defined as both normal and abnormal without dissonance. Ultimately, however, I believe that in the final research paper, my advocacy role was more pronounced than my role as impartial researcher. However, in sharing my data analysis with my research group, it was noted that the data rather than my personal biases informed the advocacy. Though I yet wrestle with the appropriateness of my advocacy stance as an ethical question, I am comfortable with the validity of my final report.

Methods:

I used participant observation, non-participant observation, tutorial discussions, and interviews to gain an understanding of member constructions of reading and behavior and to observe the strategies participants used to confront negative stereotypes. Due to high truancy and suspension rates, only one "formal" interview was conducted with the pair of students available on the day the interview was scheduled to take place. It lasted about forty-five minutes. A second "formal" interview was conducted with the teacher who had referred the most students to the reading program. This interview also lasted about forty-five minutes. Two informal (non-recorded) interviews were also conducted. The first was with a student who had been suspended everyday of the program except that particular day and the very first day. The second was with a teacher whose class was frequently referenced by the participants when talking about school, classes they liked, and the teachers who liked them. This teacher preferred not to be recorded.

The majority of the information I collected to answer my research questions came from the tutorial discussions I had with the students and my observations of their behavior inside and outside of the weekly one-hour reading tutorials conducted over a thirteen-week period and augmented by three one- to two-hour visits to the school (spent observing the social worker, faculty meetings, and the academy director) over the same period of time. Each day in the field for tutorials, I would pick students up from their respective classrooms, noting what they were doing when I picked them up and how they interacted in the halls with other students as I collected the remainder of the reading group. Once in the tutorial room, we would spend the entire hour in conversations that always began with a reading selection (Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison and/or Slam! by Walter Dean Myers), but ultimately drifted to other topics and casual talk. When we began our main novel, Slam!, half the class time was spent in oral reading and discussion, and half in responding to open-ended questions and shooting a basketball into an indoor hoop (when the question was successfully answered). In these interactions, the students' identity and my identity were constantly being negotiated and redefined in numerous small ways. Exploring the how's and why's of this identity creation became the ultimate focus of this study.
Lastly, though I did not originally set out to gather extensive documentation, several resources were shown to me by teachers seeking to recommend more students to the tutorial or to help me gain a fuller understanding of the students already involved. These resources included math textbooks that had to be read to the students in order for them to do any work, and science exams that the students completed in varying degrees - some failing to respond to even one question and others responding to only one question. These insights into the identities of the students when they were not in the tutorial class offered new ways of thinking about their identities when they were in the class and the ways in which their tutorial identities represented their confrontations and rejections of negative perceptions.

My Account/Data Analysis

Allan1 was standing in the center of the room, picking up Lego pieces off a desk and throwing them onto the floor, one by one. In total silence, Mr. Clark was standing off to one side, across the room near the door, looking on (Field notes, 4/22/04).

In many ways, this scene seems to highlight the supposed deviance of Black boys. After all, most individuals would argue that there is something "dysfunctional" about a fourteen-year-old boy standing silently beside a desk and throwing Legos onto the floor one by one by one, even if he was having a bad day. Moreover, the positioning of the White male teacher could be interpreted to suggest that this is a scene involving an uncontrollable Black male, for he is standing as far away from the boy as possible, near the door. The work of many scholars suggests that had this student been a White male or even a Black female, the dynamics of the situation would have been totally different. In reality, teachers are often complicit in the criminalization of Black boys, treating them as threats and objects of fear.

For example, Mr. Keale, another White male educator, had a similar reaction to Allan when I first arrived in his classroom to speak to Allan about the proposed tutorial.

Mr. Keale looked around. He thought that David was in the restroom and Allan seemed to have "wandered out". He indicated that they would be back shortly and where would I be so that he could send them to me. I said that I would be in the social worker's office. A few minutes later, Mr. Keale said "Here is Allan". A young man was walking away from Mr. Keale and I demanding, "Who is she that I gotta talk to her." Mr. Keale pointed at the students receding back, "That's Allan". (Fieldnotes, 2/19/04)

Though Allan was supposed to be under Mr. Keale's supervision at this time as his math student, Mr. Keale makes no attempt to address Allan or his behavior. He merely motions in Allan's general direction before returning to his own classroom.

Ferguson, in a similar study of Black boys, offers a rationale for both of these responses, "African American boys are not accorded the masculine dispensation of being 'naturally' naughty. Instead, the school reads their expression and display of masculine naughtiness as a sign of an inherent vicious, insubordinate nature that [is] a threat to order…" (Ferguson, 2001, p. 2) Thus, in many cases, the response to Black male naughtiness or misbehavior is fear and caution. Mr. Barnes seemed to exhibit both in his geographical distance from Allan and the somewhat anxious expression with which he regarded him, while Mr. Keale's complete reluctance to engage Allan is suggestive of a similar sentiment.

In both cases, it was left to me, the researcher, who had seen the adolescent at most four times, (in Mr. Keale's case, never before) to intervene/ approach the student. This intervention was possible because it never occurred to me that Allan was a threat, a criminal, or a dangerous delinquent. He was a boy standing in the middle of a room tossing Legos and/ or completely ignoring adults, and he needed to stop.

First of all, I went to Allan, grabbed him by the arm and begin pulling him toward the door.

"That's it."

He had frozen when I placed my hand on his arm, and thus did not budge. Instead, he looked down at me with wide brown eyes. I tilted my head back and stared up at him, in astonishment. He was not going to move??? He dropped his eyes and stood silently, no longer throwing Legos. In fact, he was not moving at all. It was a teachable moment. Then, Mr. Clark began to call his name
(Field notes, 4/22/04).

It seems that it is only when the "angry" Black male does not hit me, curse me, or poke me in the eye with a Lego, that Mr. Clark feels comfortable interacting with him. At that point, he has proven that he is not a threat. Yet prior to my entrance in to the room, there was no way for him to prove that he was not a threat - until he was in a frame of mind where he no longer needed support and the question itself became mute. In his anger and his grief, it is possible that he was invisible to Mr. Clark who may have seen only the media representations of Black males when he looked at him, and thus, hesitated to approach him, as did Mr. Keale. This failure to support due to negative (mis)perceptions is frequently implicated in the school failure of Black boys. But they are only boys after all, and so much of their toughness springs from the pain and isolation that the fear and caution of others imposes upon them.

I walked swiftly after Allan who was not walking fast, causing me to think that he was not attempting to evade me, only putting up a show of resistance. I caught up with him as he leaned against the wall, demanding, "Is that how your momma taught you to treat African-American women.?" He stopped walking away and stood still not looking at me. "I find that very disrespectful." I said. He looked down at his feet… We walked back to Ms. Smith's office together. (Field notes, 2/19/04)

The research cited earlier clearly suggests that in a supportive environment, young Black boys will exhibit motivation, engagement, and a willingness to learn that is at odds with the expectation of maladaptive reactions. Though support may be conceptualized in a number of ways, in this study it manifested itself as a simple willingness to allow the boys to make a first impression and to treat them as boys and not hardened criminals. This may seem like an unremarkable thing until we realize that our first impressions of Black boys come not from they themselves, but from the media, from statistics, and from our own (un)intentional biases. More often than not, they are stigmatized as dangerous and delinquent until they can prove otherwise. Yet as Stevenson (2003) notes, "Boys need everything. They need and deserve love and encouragement and correction without humiliation…Safe space, and sanctuary and room to be" (p.185). Withholding these things from Black boys has very destructive effects on their conceptions of themselves.

One way Black boys react to this lack of "room to be" became apparent as I interviewed Keithan (a 14-year-old African American male identified by the school's administration as a disciplinary problem) regarding his willingness to participate in the program.

> *As I begin to talk about my former students, some of whom have problems with teachers and often spend a lot of time talking to the principal, Keithan interrupts me with a grin, "Students like me, huh?". I look at him. "Well, I really don't know what kind of student you are yet, so I can't say" (Field notes, 3/1/04).*

The types of boys I was describing to Keithan were not the types of boys mothers raise their sons to become. They were the types of boys normally associated with the deficit model of "dumb, deviant, disturbed, disadvantaged, and dysfunctional." Yet, Keithan immediately acknowledged that he was identified with this population. His tone and grin suggested that I did not have to camouflage his reality for him or even deny complicity. Rather, his expectation was that before being "seen" by me, he was already "known" by me in terms of prevailing social images. This became clearer in a later discussion I had with him about his frequent assignment to ISS, which he casually attributed to being "known" rather than to being a discipline problem. In many ways, it seemed that his purpose in that first meeting was not to "make" an impression, but to live with the impression that was already in my mind before he entered the room.

Keithan, like many young Black boys in public schools, did himself a disservice in identifying so readily with the stereotype. Though he agreed to be in the reading program because he wanted to be with "kids like me", he was a very capable reader who did not need the tutorial. It was the assumption of many of his teachers that Keithan was a remedial student due to his excessive energy and the innovative ways he devised to channel it. Yet his performance in the tutorial suggested it was lack of challenge, rather than excessive challenge, that led to his misbehavior. Nevertheless, he accepted his recommendation to a remedial reading tutorial. His acquiescence to the inaccurate label is troubling. It could suggest the existence of internalized racism - frequently the result of continuous exposure to negative perceptions of one's identity. This seems a plausible explanation given that Keithan was only slightly familiar with most of the other young men in the tutorial, per his own admission when told who else was participating.

Moreover, many individuals who are consistently stigmatized begin to accept, if not believe, the labels imposed upon them and fail to question even the most overt acts of discrimination. This seemed to be the case with Tim, another fourteen-year-old Black male with few identified behavior concerns (based on the comments of his teachers and the relative infrequency with which he acquired suspensions) but who was experiencing reading difficulties. In a discussion of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, we explored the justification/causality of the narrator's rage at being seen as his media image rather than his actual self.

> *After lunch, Tim returned to the classroom, and we continued our discussion of the* Invisible Man*. I asked him if he has ever felt that people do not see him. If he has ever walked into a store and had people see him, not as Tim looking to buy something, but as a potential thief. He said yes, but that that was okay because most of the people who go into the stores and steal things are Black young men like him. So, they have a right to look at him like that. He said this with a calm nonchalance that was disturbing (Field notes, 4/1/04).*

At first glance, it seems tragic that Tim is not aware that, as an American citizen, he has a right to enter into a public place without being immediately stigmatized as a thief. He does not seem to realize that he, like other Americans, has a right to be recognized as visible. In his reality, as in Keithan's, being mistaken for one of society's stereotypes is a normal, everyday occurrence. These boys have not been encouraged to question the racism that allows statistics and stereotypes to make their first impressions for them, and they accept with seeming equanimity the fact their first impressions were made before they were born.

Stevenson (2003) suggests that before these teenage boys can successfully make a new impression, they must be allowed and encouraged to challenge the validity of their "default" impressions. Contexts must be created that question stereotypes about the boys, rather than the identities of the boys themselves. In fact, if they are to survive, Black boys must be given the space in which to reject society's images of them and create their own images of themselves, setting the parameters of their own identities.

Unfortunately, it is often very difficult for Black boys to find spaces in which they can define themselves in opposition to existing stereotypes. Such new images tend to have little validity in the hallways and classrooms of public schools, for they create dissonance within the five-D model. Moreover, in cases of dissonance between what is expected of Black boys and the new identities they try to inhabit, negative expectations continue to receive the greater weight. This is clearly evidenced in the following excerpt from an interview with Mr. Keale regarding another student named Leon. Leon is a stocky 9th grade African American male with identified behavior concerns (as evidenced by his selection for a tutorial program which requested students with reading difficulties and behavior problems) but a great deal of academic competency. His reading skills seemed slightly above average when compared to national statistics (grade-equivalency) for inner city Black male students. Leon frequently

requested permission to travel to the local elementary school and tutor younger children, but such permission was routinely denied on behavioral rather than academic grounds. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Mr. Keale about Leon:

> *I:…….I was actually quite um surprised at his reading ability um just in the small time that I had him reading with me.*
> *K: I think he's a very intelligent um…young… man. I haven't seen any reading problems with him. In math, he was… he has a motivation issue, but when he decided to do the work, he did it brilliantly. I- he didn't do the work most of the time……I would probably say that (??) he doesn't have a serious reading issue, but something longer that may involve a plot and maybe even higher vocabulary …*

This excerpt suggests the stereotypes and images of Black boys that saturate schools and public institutions are sometimes extremely tenacious. Though I suggest to Mr. Keale (a math teacher) that Leon is a good student and Mr. Keale's own experiences with Leon do not negate this fact, he seems to find it difficult to relinquish the stereotype of Leon as an academically deficient Black male. Though Leon has not been in his classroom for some time, and Mr. Keale has never heard him read, his words seem in to redefine Leon's success in a manner that does not challenge the five-D expectation. For example, Mr. Keale's suggestion that it is the vocabulary of the book or the shortness of the material that allows Leon to succeed in the reading task creates an impression that Leon's success is based on circumstances rather than ability. When one considers that most books with any measure of difficulty possess a plot, Mr. Keale's insinuation that the books Leon reads do not involve plots seriously undercuts his previous statement that Leon does not have "a serious reading issue". This claim is also undercut by the fact that Mr. Keale recommended Leon to the program, along with several other young Black males of average reading abilities, following a general request to the faculty to provide the names of students with serious reading and behavior problems.

In many ways, this is an ideal example of the Catch-33 situation. Leon remains on the receiving end of low academic expectations, despite the fact that Mr. Keale and I both agree on his above average competence. In this situation, as in so many others, expectations of Leon seem to be tied to more than his achievement, but also to the stories society circulates about Black boys. Thus, any signs of achievement must be accompanied by mitigating circumstances.

> The following excerpt, however, suggests that Mr. Keale's extenuating circumstances do not apply to Leon's situation.
>
> *Tim and Leon and I returned to the classroom. As I stood near a desk handing out the copies of the excerpt from Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, I asked who wanted to read. "I can't read," said Leon. I raised my eyebrows at him and handed him an excerpt anyway. Tim said, "I'll read." in a "don't worry about it, no big deal" voice. Tim sat at the teacher's desk and Leon sat a desk near the front of the room. We began with an excerpt from Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man…*
>
> *As we settled back to the book, I asked if the invisible man was really invisible. Tim suggested that it could be that people don't see him as he is - exactly the point. As Tim read further, he hesitated over the word "spook." Leon pronounced it for him, assuring Tim that he was "dumb." I glared at Leon and he stopped. The next word Tim came to was "ectoplasm" which Leon again pronounced for Tim, sparing us his compliments (Field notes, 4/1/04).*

Several things are happening in this scenario, but most immediately apparent is the fact that in most literary circles, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man is considered to have both a plot and difficult vocabulary. Yet, the pervasiveness of the "dumb, deviant, disturbed, disadvantaged, and dysfunctional" model provides evidence for the fact that Mr. Keale made the exact opposite assumption regarding the nature of the reading material. In addition, Leon's immediate assertion upon entering the classroom and receiving a copy of the text was to say that he could not read. Given that he later established the fact the he could read, this first statement can be considered "dancing in the stereotype" (Stevenson, personal communication, 2004) - making a game out of one's constant exposure to racism. Leon's jest seems to reflect an awareness similar to that of Keithan and Tim: assumptions of his academic deficiency are not based on his actions, but on his identity as an African American male. In short, I should be able to tell by looking at him that he cannot read. This does not seem too far from Mr. Keale's own perception.

In contrast, the reading class allowed Leon to make his own first impression and created a space in which he could reject the stereotypes surrounding him and invoke and substantiate his counter-identity as a reader. Unfortunately, Mr. Keale's response suggests that the process of securing acceptance for these counter-identities in the wider contexts of the school would necessitate the incorporation of a comprehensive school reform model similar to that of Cooper and Jordan (2003). That issue, however, is beyond the scope of the current study.

For the purposes of this study, I ultimately came to view the existence of this opportunity to make a first impression as the key to

understanding the identity definition I was observing. Though it appeared to me then a strange, researchable activity, its very abnormality is a sad commentary on the plight of Black boys. For most children, adolescence is a time of exploring and (re)defining their personal identity. For Black male adolescents, it is a time of dealing with an identity they have inherited from society and coping with the invisibility of their true potential.

"All men are great in their imaginations" (as quoted in Stevenson, 2003, p. 184). In the context of the reading program, where their first impressions were not predetermined, many of the boys felt free to "imagine" and project identities outside of the deviance paradigm. Though these identities seem to have had limited scope, their production marked the beginning of a process of self-affirmation that is crucial in the confrontation and rejection of stereotypes.

One such incident of self-definition occurred in the last weeks of the reading class. David, a Black Muslim student with a blend of moderate behavior concerns (as described by teachers) and reading difficulties, explored the potential inherent in being the "top student."

> *When the class ends, David stands with his book and begins placing it in his pocket, saying loudly, "This is a good book. I'm taking it with me" (Field notes, 4/22/04).*

This may seem like a very simple statement unworthy of notice, but it is an act of self-definition that rejects his prevailing school image. In several of his classes, David is perceived as both a "poor reader" and a "non-motivated" student. His keeping the book to take home with him, which had been preceded by an extensive amount of voluntary oral reading, served to create an identity that challenged the image of the "lazy under-achiever." It not only painted him as a reader, but it depicted him as a motivated and competent student. As a "top student," he had contributed more than his share to the classroom discussion. Next, he voluntarily took the book home to continue reading it (assigning himself homework), though the other boys in the class opted to leave their books with me.

In doing these things, David challenges the extant stereotypes of young Black boys in the school: he chooses to identify as a reader. Other boys in the study sought to identify merely as "good" students, engaging in the learning process to a degree so at odds with their labels that it attracted the notice of several teachers and lead to a flurry of student referrals at the end of the study. This suggests that in some cases substantiating and encouraging efforts at self-affirmation/self-definition by Black boys enable educators to create spaces in which these boys can develop positive coping strategies in the face of negative and stress-inducing stereotypes.

Unfortunately, though allowing the boys to make their own first impressions in this study led to the invoking of positive counter-identities, the data suggest that these students are seldom in contexts in which the stereotypes attached to them are not entrenched realities. When given a choice, all students in the study chose to consistently identify themselves as capable, functional, intelligent, and advantaged, yet in the wider spaces of the school these options were seldom available to them. The following excerpt offers a mild contextualization of the daily reality of these boys outside the cloistered environment of the reading tutorial. The research suggests that the reality of many Black boys in America reflect continuous exposure to magnified versions of these events. The following excerpt is from an interview with Mr. Keale:

> *K: ……"And…you know, and I feel bad saying this as an educator, but every once and a while it's like, okay David, (soft laugh) you may go. Because he, I either have to sit with him and read the book with him again, he's one of those, he's like Allan in that he, unless there's somebody right by his side to get him through the book, um he doesn't, he does almost nothing."*

The two excerpts that follow are from my own field notes:

> *After talking to Leon of several minutes, I dismissed him from the classroom. Within minutes of his stepping into the hallway, someone was yelling his name. "Leon Harris! Get out of this hallway! Go to lunch!" I started to step out into the hallway and explain his presence, but the silence seemed to indicate that it was already too late (Field notes, 4/1/04).*

> *I came upon Keithan in the office. "I need a pass to get into class." He explained. (His math teacher did not believe that he had been in a reading tutorial and would not let him in the classroom.) I told Keithan that I would walk with him to his classroom…. The door was opened by the math teacher. "I told you-" Keithan began. "Boy, get in here," he said (Addendum notes, 4/29/04).*

Finally, though offering new ways of viewing the identity constructions of Black boys, this study is not meant to suggest that these boys and others like them do not have "human" identities. They do. They skip classes to play basketball in the gym. They chase their girlfriends through the hallways begging for kisses. They curse when they are angry and when they are not. They arrive in classrooms without paper or books and sometimes fail to answer even a single question on major exams. During the course of this study, they did all of these things, and some of these things they will probably continue to do.

This study does suggest that the challenge to us as educators is to view these boys as boys when they do these things and not as societal threats or aggressive criminals. We must ensure that the perceptions that we have of them do not preclude the growth, the change, and the growing pains that are so often a part of adolescence. As Black male teens, they are still trying to establish their identities, and our expectations of them must leave space for them to confront stereotypes and redefine themselves without being placed in a straightjacket comprised of societal prejudices. We cannot interpret behaviors as deficits, label them immutable character traits, and then expect to successfully educate Black boys. Paradigms of deviance and deficit deny Black male teens of the most beautiful aspect of youth-the ability to learn. Black male adolescents CAN explore and develop identities outside of the expectation of "dumb, deviant, disturbed, disadvantaged, and dysfunctional", but this is more likely to happen in those spaces where these traits are seen as potential behaviors rather than entrenched realities. In the words of Desmond Tutu,

> *"We tend to see children as statistics, but they really are not. They are somebody's child. And if we do not do all that we can to salvage them, it is as if we are spitting in the face of God."*

What are we doing to salvage our Black boys?

Future Research:

Though I am pleased with the information I was able to gather in this study, I would welcome the opportunity to go back to my site and do a more extended research project. I do not think that my questions themselves would change very much, for I would still be interested in how these boys define themselves within and without the paradigm of deviance. I would also like to explore to a greater extent how their teachers situate them within this paradigm. Moreover, in this study I only interacted with five boys. I would love to be able to work with fifteen or more of them. Also, if the length of the study were extended, the effect of suspensions and truancy would not be as great as it was in the current study; this would allow me to explore more fully the development of their counter-identities over time and to note the occurrence of any regressions.

In a longer study, I would also allot more time to observing students' classroom interactions with teachers - those cited in the current study and others. This would allow me to form a more complete idea of how their interactions in the classroom mirror or contradict their interactions in the reading tutorial. Perhaps the teachers I spoke with only remembered the bad days because they were memorable and failed to take note of the good days when the behavior of the student did not reflect the deviance paradigm. Or perhaps they were reluctant to speak of the truly bad days for fear that it would reflect negatively on their practice. I do not know. Sometimes as humans, we see only what we expect to see, and we only share what does not cause us harm. Observing class interactions myself could potentially avoid such reporting bias.

In addition, I would change the way I conducted interviews with the boys, scheduling them later in the study when they are more likely to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me and discussing the reasons for their academic successes and failures. In addition to the group interviews, I would schedule several individual interviews with those boys whose reading and classroom identities seemed the most divergent. I would also schedule more interviews with the teachers about their impressions of the boys and the progress of the boys in their classrooms. I would seek a mix of races and genders and note any similarities/differences in teacher and student definitions of achievement and behavior.

Finally, I would make a major change in the design of the program itself. Instead of a reading tutorial, I would call it a reading enrichment program designed to promote critical thinking skills, and I would market it differently in speaking to the students. In this way, perhaps I myself could avoid raising the specter of "dumbness" in the minds of the participants.

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Endnotes

1 - All names used in this piece are pseudonyms.back

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