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# "Thank You For Saying My Name": Academic Recognition as a Counternarrative For Black Male Achievement

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I thank Robbie Lowery for his multiple conversations and critical feedback during the development of this manuscript. I also thank David for being an inspiration for my contribution to the development of a counternarrative of Black male achievement and culturally responsive school leaders. Finally, I thank the reviewers of this manuscript for their helpful feedback.

## **“Thank You For Saying My Name”: Academic Recognition as a Counternarrative for Black Male Achievement**

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*The author reflects on her experience as a middle school administrator involved in a school-wide initiative to recognize academic growth and achievement. She draws upon Perry’s theory of African-American achievement (2003) to explain how this recognition, which included several Black boys, contributed to a counternarrative of Black male achievement. In contrast to the dominant narrative of academic failure and discipline problems (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Grant, 2011; Howard, 2013; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2008), this recognition created a new narrative of academic excellence and achievement (Allen, 2015). The concerted effort by school leadership to include new and underrepresented faces in a recognition of academic excellence was appreciated by a Black seventh grade student named David (a pseudonym), who, after winning an award for academic growth, approached the author and said, “Thank you for saying my name.” Culturally responsive school leadership behaviors will aid in the creation of a narrative of academic success that includes Black boys. Leadership preparation programs must prepare candidates to be culturally responsive leaders who lead dialogue about race, support positive behavior, and have high academic expectations, to create a counternarrative of achievement.*

**KEYWORDS:** Black males, academic achievement, counternarrative, culturally responsive school leadership

The overwhelming failure of the American P-12 educational system to provide Black<sup>1</sup> males as a whole, equitable access to engaging and rigorous curriculum is well documented (see Howard, 2013 for a comprehensive overview and analysis of recent literature). For example, The Schott Foundation estimated that national public school graduation rates in 2012-13 were 59% for Black males, 65% for Latino males and 80% for White males (schottfoundation.org). In 2012, 48.3% of Black males had ever been suspended. This was more than twice the percentage of Hispanic (22.6%), White (21.4%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (11.2%) males who had ever been suspended (nces.ed.gov).

The ways in which Black males must navigate a socially constructed narrative about their underachievement, failure, violence, and exclusion has also been documented (Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013). Scholars have investigated the many contributing factors to this, which are rooted in racism. More specifically, they include: the sociopolitical and historical realities of racism (Grant, 2011); overarching deficit-laden views about Black boys (Allen, 2015; McGee & Pearman, 2015); stereotypes about Black males as violent, criminal and anti-school (Allen, 2017; Givens, Nasir, Ross, & Royston, 2016; Noguera, 2008) which contribute to inequitable exclusionary discipline practices (Flynn, Lissy, Alicea, Tazartes, & McKay, 2016); the inability to conceptualize Black boys as children experiencing boyhood (Dumas & Nelson, 2016); and a

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<sup>1</sup> There are various terms used in reference to Black people in the United States, including African American, African-American, Black, and black. I have chosen the term Black primarily because recent scholarship uses the term (for example, Allen, 2015, 2017; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard, 2013). I use African-American and African American when referencing Perry’s (2003) theory because that is how she uses the terms, although she also uses the term Black interchangeably. References to Blacks by other terms appear due to direct quotes by the authors.

lack of self-reflection on the part of educators to examine their internal biases, power, cultural awareness, vis-à-vis the sociopolitical conditions and contexts of Black boys (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Due to the social construction of Black males as deficits, they must navigate a system in which they are by and large, seen as problems (Allen, 2017; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2008). One problem with this, is the racially oppressive structures that perpetuate this narrative. Another problem is that Black boys are discussed in the context of failure both by those who have internalized racist stereotypes of Black males *and* by those who, in the name of social and racial justice, seek to identify and eradicate the conditions, attitudes, and practices that foster academic failure. An unintended consequence is that those efforts by scholars and activists may also reify the narrative of Black male failure by associating Black boys with failure. Perry (2003) addressed this emerging dilemma by explaining that although well-intentioned, “the commonsense notion that the first step for a district committed to improving African-American academic performance is acknowledging that there is a problem...will almost surely reinforce the national ideology about Black intellectual inferiority” (p. 8).

One consequence of this narrative of failure is when Black boys are mentioned in schools (outside of athletics or entertainment), they are commonly spoken about in relation to academic failure (Ford & Moore, 2013; Schnyder, 2012) or exclusionary discipline practices (Monroe, 2005). In other words, they are disproportionately represented in low academic performance and high behavior incidents (Allen, 2017; Okilwa & Robert, 2017). This reifies the narrative that “bad boys [are] always black” (Monroe, 2005, p. 45).

Another consequence of the continual recounting of failure is that it can result in an overwhelmingly bleak outlook, particularly in urban settings, and overshadow the stories and practices of those who are achieving (Harper, 2015; Rodriguez & Greer, 2017) as well as practices by educators that facilitate the development of counternarratives of Black male achievement. That is, the creation of identities of Black males as academic achievers. Thankfully, research that investigates Black male high academic achievement is emerging, such as Harper’s (2015) exploration of visual counternarratives of successful Black and Latino males in public high schools documented through photographs.

### **Purpose**

A counternarrative of Black males as learners, rather than failures; citizens, rather than criminals; and participants, rather than outsiders, is meaningful for all students. The purpose of this article is to present and analyze one effort by a middle school leadership team, of which I was an administrator, towards this goal. I recount how academic recognition of students based on proficiency and growth measures contributed to this counternarrative because of the recognition of Black males who were included in the awards. An appreciation for inclusion in the narrative of academic achievement, as opposed to failure or discipline, was evidenced by David<sup>2</sup>, a seventh-grade student who was previously “recognized” for misbehavior. He said to me, “Thank you for saying my name.” Indeed, there were many stories about the joy and appreciation students of multiple identities expressed upon hearing their names. I am focusing on David’s story here, given the emerging literature that documents a need to identify asset-based strategies for the inclusion of Black males.

Given the increasing research about black male identity and school, David’s expression of ‘thank you’ in response to his inclusion in the school-wide discourse about achievement is important (Givens et al., 2016). In addition, this article is significant because it contributes to research regarding school leadership practices to create structures to acknowledge academic

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<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym.

identity and achievement. There is increasing research regarding classroom pedagogies to increase equity, social justice, and achievement (Paris & Alim, 2014; Muhammad & Hollie, 2012), but considerably less regarding how leaders create school-wide narratives that acknowledge and include Black males as achievers. This article addresses the growing need to extend discussion of culturally responsive practices beyond the classroom to the entire school community to meet the needs of “minoritized” communities (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). By focusing on Black males, these practices contribute to the creation of a counternarrative of African American achievement (Perry, 2003). After a brief summary of pedagogies and practices that value African American males, I will elaborate on Perry’s theory of African American achievement.

### **Review of Literature: Practices to Support Black Male Achievement & Discipline**

Scholars interested in identifying institutional and social factors that contribute to underachievement, rather than blaming perceived deficits of Black boys and their families, have identified multiple pedagogies and practices. Educators who value the assets of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families place their students’ culture and identities at the center of curriculum, while also developing sociopolitical awareness of inequities and ways to address them. These justice-oriented (Dover, 2015) or asset pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014) include multicultural education (Nieto, 2010), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010), the pedagogy of confidence (Jackson, 2011) and many others. Paris & Alim (2014) conceptualized culturally sustaining pedagogy as an attempt “to shift the term, stance, and practice of asset pedagogies toward more explicitly pluralist outcomes” (p. 87) by sustaining “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” (p. 88) rather than assimilating to White middle-class norms.

Scholarship regarding racial disproportionality and the impact of exclusionary school discipline practices on achievement and increased risk for entering the juvenile justice system is commonly framed within investigating the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). It has informed the elimination of zero-tolerance policies, professional development about cultural responsiveness, which includes internal reflection of educators to confront their internal biases that lead to increased surveillance and misinterpretation of Black male behavior (Allen, 2017), and coaching for teachers (Flynn et al., 2016). Perhaps the most widespread approach to addressing disproportionality has been the implementation of school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS). SWPBS is a system designed to prevent misbehavior by focusing on developing relationships and emphasizing teaching of schoolwide expectations, consistent reinforcement and consequences, monitoring student behaviors, and data-based decision making (Tobin & Vincent, 2011). Culturally responsive SWPBS integrates cultural awareness and cultural relevance into systems-wide practices (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011).

Research indicates that commitment to asset pedagogies and culturally responsive support systems address low academic achievement and high discipline incidents (Howard, 2013). While SWPBS is typically implemented with school leadership’s involvement, asset pedagogies could be left to individual teachers’ classrooms. Yet, these practices have more capacity to create equity when enacted by leadership at the school and district levels.

Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) is enacted by leaders who seek to create buildings or districts responsive to culturally and linguistically diverse students and families. In their expansive review of literature about CRSL, Khalifa et al. (2016), “highlight[ed] practices and actions, mannerisms, policies, and discourses that influence school climate, school structure,

teacher efficacy, or student outcomes” (p. 1274). The authors drew connections between asset pedagogies developed in teacher education that informed the development of culturally responsive and proficient leadership (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). A common thread among them is the centrality of the voices of marginalized educators and students:

Yet, in essence, they all share a common, central point: the need for children’s educators and educational contexts to understand, respond, incorporate, accommodate, and ultimately celebrate the entirety of the children they serve – including their languages and literacies, spiritual universes, cultures, racial proclivities, behaviors, knowledges, critical thought, and appearances” (pp. 1277-1278).

In contrast to Paris and Alim (2014), the authors assert that the term *culturally responsive* best characterizes the ability to respond to the various educational, cultural, and sociopolitical needs of students. This is because “CRSL is not only liberatory and antioppressive, it is also affirmative, and seeks to identify and institutionalize practices that affirm Indigenous and authentic cultural practices of students” (p. 1278). It is unclear how this is substantively different from Paris and Alim’s (2014) explanation of why *culturally sustaining* is a more accurate term to describe these practices. Perhaps this is a reason why Khalifa et al. (2016) contend that the literature often includes “unclear, if not conflicting, characterizations” (p. 1277).

Khalifa et al. (2016) identified four strands of CRSL behaviors. They found that culturally responsive school leaders: critically self-reflect on leadership behaviors; develop culturally responsive teachers; promote culturally responsive/inclusive school environments; and engage students, parents, and indigenous contexts. Collectively, these behaviors create an inclusive environment and culture, develop relationships, limit exclusionary discipline practices, and promote academic achievement.

I have reviewed how pedagogies and leadership behaviors have been enacted to create social justice, equity, and inclusion broadly and therefore, for Black males as a subgroup. A goal of these pedagogies is equity in opportunity, high academic achievement and the disruption of predictable patterns of behavior incidents based on race and other identity categories. Through the creation of an inclusive school environment that yields data that reflects equity in access, opportunity and achievement, leaders facilitate the transformation of a narrative about who they believe can succeed. Thus, a counternarrative to Black males as academic failure emerges. When academic success is no longer predictable based upon race, hegemonic structures that reproduce inequality are challenged. This counternarrative has particular meaning for Black males within a particular sociopolitical and historical context.

### **Counternarrative**

Perry’s (2003) development of a theory of African-American achievement is predicated upon her assertion “that the task of academic achievement for African Americans in the context of school in the United States of America is distinctive” (p. 4). This is due to several reasons regarding how they have been treated in schools and messages they have received about their academic worth. Much of this is due to a lack of academic recognition, a belief in African American intellectual inferiority, unfair grading, stereotypical understandings of African

Americans, oppressive social practices and racist structures, and resistance to cultural assimilation in order to succeed.

Because of the systemic degradation of African Americans, schooling requires that they work towards socially constructed ways of excellence as defined by the same societal norms that “[have] always been about...questioning Black intellectual competence” (p. 5). This is not to say that Black people have succumbed to these notions of inferiority. To the contrary, Perry asserted:

Evidence from history and the African-American narrative tradition suggests that African Americans have understood the distinctive nature of the task of achievement. And out of their lived experience, from slavery to the dismantling of segregated schools, they have developed and enacted a philosophy of education...This philosophy was freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership (p. 6).

A counternarrative of Black students as achievers and activists that was in direct opposition to the dominant messages of inferiority, is situated in the context of segregated schools and historically Black colleges. Within these “counterhegemonic figured communities” (p.91), Black educators and families taught Black children to respect themselves and acknowledge their self-worth, effectively, “counter[ing] the identities of their students and students’ parents as members of an oppressed people” (p. 90). This includes multiple examples of Black peoples’ intellectual capabilities, resistance against oppression, and agency to gain literacy in order to vote and to be social and political leaders. These examples formed a philosophy of education that became part of the institutional systems of segregated schooling and forged a reconceptualization of Black educators and students as learners.

Counterhegemonic communities were created during a different era of racial segregation of Black schools and Black teachers. It is important not to directly transfer this understanding to a current context without considering the different sociopolitical conditions of today. However, public schools today are racially segregated, although not always with same-race teachers. Within racially diverse schools, Black males may find themselves alone in honors or advanced courses. This means that not only Black educators must concern themselves with the development and perpetuation of a counternarrative of Black boys as achievers. The creation of a counternarrative in the context of today’s schooling would be in direct opposition to the dominant narrative of Black boys as bad, incapable, or anti-school. It requires the continual re-articulation and establishment of positive Black achievement in purposeful ways led by school leaders. Consequently, school leaders bear the responsibility for collaboratively establishing a vision and high expectations for all students, including Black males. Next, I describe the efforts of a school-wide leadership team, of which I was a member, to create such a counternarrative.

### **Context and Summary of Student Recognition**

I was an assistant principal at Anna Julia Cooper<sup>3</sup> middle school, one of 12 middle schools which serves approximately 600 students in a district of approximately 25,000 students. The district, which is in a metropolitan city in a Midwestern state, is culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse. African American<sup>4</sup> students comprised 20%, American Indian and Pacific Islander student groups each comprised 0.5%, Asian students comprised 9%, Latina/o students

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup> Term used in district data.

comprised 27%, White students comprised 34%, and students who identify as two or more races comprised 9% of the student population at the middle school.

Student data at Cooper were indicative of national trends that indicate institutional barriers to Black student engagement. For example, during the years that we engaged in school-wide professional development regarding culturally responsive school discipline, out-of-school suspensions decreased from 144 in 2011, to 26 in 2013. However, disproportionality increased. In 2011, African Americans (who comprised 20% of the student population) accounted for 42% of suspensions but in 2013, they accounted for 67%. Data from the 2013-14 statewide assessment indicates that African American students collectively scored the lowest on the statewide assessment; 11% scored proficient or advanced in reading in comparison to 12% of Latina/o, 24% of Asian, and 48% of White students.<sup>5</sup>

David was a seventh-grade African American student with whom I was well acquainted. During the previous year (when David was in sixth grade), I saw him often because he was frequently sent out of the classroom for disruptive behavior. He also received low grades. As we implemented a system wherein administration went to classrooms to try to support students to change their behavior, his name was called regularly. Often, when I arrived to the classroom, he was calmly waiting by the door then proceeded to give me an elaborate summary of the latest conflict. It usually was related to him not following teacher directions, talking to a friend, not engaging in the activities, or “talking back” to the teacher. Sometimes, I could see the look on students’ faces as if they were thinking, “It’s David again.” It was as if they expected him to get in trouble, or in the very least, they considered him having to process his behavior to be a normal part of class procedures. He was very reflective and often acknowledged his own role in the conflict with statements such as, “Now, I realize that I should stop talking...” or “True, I was disrespectful, but...” He was very engaging in one-on-one interactions and his mood could dominate the room whether he was happy, mad or sad.

Meanwhile, our leadership team engaged faculty and staff in ongoing professional development about how to meet the needs of all students through conversations and skill development about race, internal bias, restorative justice and engaging academic practices. David’s seventh grade year reflected his improved academic engagement and efforts by his teachers to effectively engage him.

Previous to David’s seventh grade year, all middle schools were mandated to utilize the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments in reading, language usage, and math. The MAP suite of assessments is a set of computerized adaptive tests created by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) to support educators to make data-based instructional decisions by measuring students’ academic proficiency and growth (nwea.org). Note that this reflection of my experience is not an endorsement of the use of MAP, any particular test, testing in general, or a belief that testing is the only or best way to identify students’ strengths and areas for improvement. Rather, the purpose of this article is to examine our strategy to recognize student strengths in the context of district-mandated use of the tests.

The idea to recognize student achievement on the test was developed in our school-wide leadership team which consisted of administrators, teachers, and an educational assistant. Our rationale was two-fold. First, we wanted to reward students for taking the tests seriously and not succumbing to test fatigue. Each student took the reading, language usage, and math tests twice a year, in addition to the state-wide assessment. Second, because MAP assessments measure

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<sup>5</sup> All demographic and achievement data were retrieved from the statewide database that includes state, district, and school information, and includes a link to the US Department of Education for access to behavior data that is reported at the federal level.



student growth, we wanted to capitalize on the opportunity to recognize students who were not typically recognized for academic proficiency.

We engaged in several logistical discussions. We considered such issues as how many students to recognize, whether to recognize growth and proficiency, the time of day to do the recognition, mode (over the intercom, via announcements within each class, or scrolling the names on the school-wide television network), whether or not to print out academic certificates, and if we did, how to distribute them. We also discussed what, if any, implications there were regarding messages we might be sending if there were racial patterns in who won or did not win. We decided that it was important for the entire school to hear all of the names in order to honor the accomplishments of our diverse student body. Ultimately, we agreed to honor the top three achievers for academic proficiency and academic growth for each grade level (6–8) in each of our six smaller learning communities. Students were recognized in each of the three subjects tested. We read the names via the school-wide television network for each content area, one per day over three days at the end of the school day.

On the first day of the recognition, I went into a teacher's room to make the reminder announcement about the recognition. David was in that class, and after I made the announcement, I heard him express unhappiness about having to listen to the MAP celebration. The teacher positively redirected him saying, "Come on, David. You'll be okay. You are going to want to hear this" (Teachers received the awards ahead of time, so the teacher knew what was to come). David received a growth award. After school, David approached me and said, "Thank you for saying my name." I responded, "You are welcome. Thank you for making it so I could say your name. You did it." He responded, "But you said it," and walked away, smiling.

I sent an e-mail to the faculty expressing my gratitude for their commitment to the endeavor and recounted my interaction with David. The five teachers in David's smaller learning community communicated their joy about his achievement. His homeroom teacher said that she always believed in him and knew he could do it. The others expressed similar sentiments and reflected on how much he improved in both academics and behavior since the previous year. David finished the last two weeks of the school year on a high, with no behavior incidents and improved academics compared to the previous year.

Across the school, through conversation or via e-mail, several teachers shared how other students responded to hearing their names for academic recognition. One teacher wrote, "I also had students who, like David, have never heard their names for positive academic accomplishments. Two of them did [hear their names] and the hooting and dancing made the experience even more powerful." I had positive interactions with other students during this time, as well. For example, on one of the days at student dismissal, I ran after a student because I gave her award to the wrong teacher. I saw her often because of behavior incidents and she was not always happy to see me. I asked her to wait for me to run back to my office in order to get the award so she could take it home that day. She shrugged her shoulders, so I was not totally convinced she was going to wait. However, when I returned she was waiting for me and smiled when I gave her the award.

The three days of academic recognition were a celebration of students, faculty, and staff collectively rejoicing about academic achievement. However, there was one unintended negative consequence to recognizing the top three students in each grade level. A teacher informed me that she had to console a crying student. The student said that she could not improve her scores no matter how hard she tried. I brought this issue to a few members of the leadership team. We discussed this unfortunate consequence of placing a limit on how many students that were recognized. We postulated that even if we recognized every student that achieved growth, proficiency, and advanced on the test, there would still be students that tried hard and would not

achieve growth or proficiency. At that time, we decided that three students for each test and grade level was appropriate. More importantly, we realized the necessity of having *multiple* opportunities for recognition of academic achievement and positive contributions to school culture in other ways.

The two final weeks of the school year ended on a positive note. Faculty looked forward to planning next year's recognition and possibly incorporating other ways to recognize students' academic achievement throughout the year. My involvement in future planning came to a halt that summer when I transitioned to a career as a professor. In the years since I left the school, faculty have shared information about the recognition in informal conversations. The awards continue to be a joyful experience for the school community and there have been changes. First, students now test only for reading and math. Therefore, the top three students in each smaller learning community are recognized for growth and achievement on those two tests. Second, the top ten students throughout the entire school for both measures on each test are recognized. Different prizes have been awarded throughout the years, including certificates for teachers based on the achievement of their class, and treats such as ice cream in addition to student certificates.

I do not know the extent to which Cooper faculty engage Black boys in an ongoing creation of a counternarrative for academic success outside of the awards. Knowing that one instance of recognition is inadequate, a collective examination and development of multiple ways to positively engage Black boys is necessary. The awards recognition is one entry point into this important and complex work, and there are many points to consider for the creation of such a counternarrative that is sustained throughout schools. I highlight some of these points in the next section.

## Discussion

First, I reiterate that there is much to consider regarding whether the use of standardized tests reproduces hegemonic views of academic behavior and performance that create inequity, and whether recognizing the top three students is counterproductive to social justice. However, at minimum, the acknowledgement of students', such as David's, academic growth widens our collective understanding and expectations about who is capable of achievement.

We read each student's name out loud because we believed that students need to hear and see themselves as successes in order to create identities as academic achievers. David's name was called many times for negative things. That day, his name was read for a positive academic achievement. By saying "thank you" he communicated that he valued that positive recognition. It is the speaking and honoring of students (some of whom have never received an award for academics) that helps to change their identities as learners. Perry (2003) asserted that in today's context, "the most important thing schools...can do is to figure out how to develop among African-American children and youth *identities of achievement* (italics original, p. 100). By saying "thank you," and "But you said it," David acknowledged that he was aware at some level, of how speaking his name as an academic achiever changed the narrative about his identity as an achiever.

Rather than responding with surprise at his accomplishment, David expressed appreciation that I publicly acknowledged what he already knew—that he is an achiever—and that I included him in the school-wide discourse. He understood that he was not written off (Allen, 2017). It is possible that he also understood that leaders choose to celebrate certain students and that the narratives about who excel in school and who do not are based on who gets "named." This is an indication that Black boys have developed sociopolitical consciousness and can be

“social and cultural actors” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). There is a dearth of research regarding the identity development of Black boys. More research is needed regarding how this influences their academic identity (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) and how it might inform leadership practices.

Issues of identity and Black male student achievement are relevant to entire school communities. The public recognition of Black boys taught students of other identities that Black boys can and do achieve academically. Witnessing this achievement hopefully challenged the stereotypical understanding about black students’ capabilities and informed our entire school that no one should be disregarded as a scholar. This is one aspect of creating a collective culture of academic achievement and is one responsibility of culturally responsive school leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Our frank and honest discussions about race were an important part of this process. Since academic teams used data to design interventions, we were aware of the racial trends in achievement. More pointedly, that Black students were underrepresented in proficient and advanced categories. We discussed race and considered how our actions might reinforce the dominant narrative of Black inferiority. We engaged in several honest and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about race and equity. Some people wanted to focus only on the growth achievers, arguing that students who would win for proficiency are likely recognized continuously – not only in individual classes, but also in quarterly award ceremonies. Others, some of whose own children were considered high achieving, felt it was unfair to overlook them just because they consistently perform well. Furthermore, they argued that since some students were already achieving at 95% or higher proficiency, it would be impossible for them to win a growth award.

There were concerns that while Black and Brown children would be recognized for growth, there would be essentially a two-tiered system based on color: White students recognized for proficiency and Black and Brown children recognized for growth. We considered whether this would reinforce notions of Black and Brown inferiority. We decided that it was important to recognize both growth and proficiency because the high achievers should not be ignored, and we were open to new patterns emerging in terms of award recipients. Ultimately, we decided that the inclusion of students who would be honored for academic achievement, outweighed the possibility of reinscribing a racially tiered system of achievement. The racial patterns were borne out. A higher percentage of White students received proficiency awards. However, several non-White students also received proficiency awards, which added to a counternarrative about which students have academic potential.

Several issues remain regarding testing, achievement, recognition, and the creation of a counternarrative for academic success, particularly for Black boys. It would be helpful for faculty to better understand the extent to which positive recognition of traditionally marginalized students, and Black boys in particular, contribute to high expectations of themselves, other students, and faculty. Some of my former colleagues noted that it is hard to know how a recognition such as these impacts students. Some students who won awards approached school more positively, while others did not. Some students’ grades and behavior trended toward improvement, while others did not. These variations in performance illustrate how one instance of academic recognition is not a magic wand for increasing student engagement and achievement. Second, they demonstrate the need for formal investigation of how practices implemented to create a counternarrative contribute to Black male achievement. Perhaps a longitudinal study that includes various academic and behavior data and phenomenological methods that include students as participants might be meaningful. It is also important to review extant literature about promising leadership practices that support a counternarrative of African American male academic success (Harper, 2015).

## **Implications for Educational Leadership Practitioners and Preparation Programs**

Perry (2003) asserted, “When school communities are constructed such that membership in these communities means being an achiever, African-American students achieve...” (p. 100). Much of this counternarrative is rooted in examinations of success, rather than failure. Therefore, it behooves researchers to frame studies that inquire about Black students’ successes, in order to understand the types of schooling that yield higher rates of success for Black males (Rodriguez & Greer, 2017; Warren, 2016). As Harper (2015) aptly stated, “those who wish to better understand success have much to learn from young men who have been successful and from schools that prepare students for college, [and] maintain safe and respectful urban school environments...” (p. 162). This knowledge in turn, should be made accessible to and processed by practitioners. After processing the new knowledge, it becomes the responsibility of school leaders to create cultures of student achievement (Muhammad & Hollie, 2012) that form a counternarrative in opposition to Black failure. Examples of such actions are offered below.

Leaders must actively change the current narrative by creating systems that facilitate academic opportunities and celebrate Black male academic achievement. Through the use of multiple research-based practices, school leaders and faculty in leadership preparation programs can prepare candidates to address several of the social and institutional barriers to African American achievement cited at the beginning of this article. I highlight four areas for action in the next section. Leaders should: create visual counternarratives that challenge deficit-laden views of Black males; facilitate access to rigorous academic opportunities; make data-informed decisions about inequitable academic and disciplinary processes; and incorporate critical reflection and discussion into faculty and staff meetings to confront and process internal biases regarding Black boys. I relate the four actions to the framework of culturally responsive school leadership described by Khalifa et al. (2016). The last three actions highlighted are identified as culturally responsive leadership behaviors, while the creation of visual counternarratives is similar to an aspect of the behavior of “engaging students, parents, and indigenous contexts” discussed by the authors (p. 1284).

### **Visual Counternarratives**

In order to understand contributing factors to the experiences of successful urban Black and Latino male high school students, Harper (2015) analyzed photographic data that captured positive engagement and success, rather than images that reinforced urban schools and students as problems. Harper’s method of data collection also captured evidence of several leadership practices in which school leaders made their belief in creating a positive discourse about urban schools and the academic abilities of Black and Latino males visibly accessible throughout the school. For example, photographs included the physical structure of buildings that were clean, well kept, and void of broken windows; the display of college and university pennants throughout hallways; teachers’ display of placards from their alma maters; the display of college and university letters of acceptance; and a bulletin board that explained college-related vocabulary such as open admissions, fee waiver, and rolling admissions. In contrast to schools where similar visual displays might only be located in Advanced Placement or honors classrooms, the placement of such displays in areas where all students have access to them, communicates a collective belief that all students, including Black boys, are capable of academic success.

Harper’s method of photographic data revealed several strategies that leaders can implement in order to create a visual counternarrative of academic success. Although the purpose

of Harper's article was not to argue that pictures of Black males interacting positively with school and society should be posted throughout schools, one result of his research is that readers come to understand the assets of Black male achievers in urban schools (as well as the school spaces themselves). Just as an emerging field of research which documents the success of African American boys will contest deficit-laden research, practitioners can incorporate imagery of successful Black boys throughout their schools. For example, rather than using stock photos of inspirational sayings, leaders can create posters of pictures of their own students, including Black boys, who are academically engaged, or successfully graduate. In other words, while Harper's (2015) photographs were data for his study, school leaders can collect evidence about the ways in which Black boys achieve and display that throughout their building.

Although they do not specifically reference the creation of visual counternarratives, Khalifa et al. (2016) describe one behavior of culturally responsive school leaders as engaging in actions that "resist deficit images of students and families" (p. 1284). One way to address this is for leaders to involve parents and community members in the creation of curriculum. Another possibility is for leaders to consider ways to incorporate or allow students to express their appreciation for contemporary symbols of minoritized communities, such as hip-hop culture, without fear of punishment.

### **Access to Rigorous Academic Opportunities**

The use of data to understand which students have access to rigorous core curriculum and the most qualified teachers will help leaders assess the extent to which pathways for academic success exist for Black males (Warren, 2016). Conversely, an examination of the placement of Black boys in remedial classes should lead to the elimination of those patterns. As Warren noted, "Remediating them [Black males] academically only slows them down. It does not give them the skills and confidence to learn more, faster" (p. 31). All students deserve high quality curriculum and instruction, yet Black males may not be placed in rigorous classrooms. An assessment of school-wide data is necessary in order to judge school-wide systems and practices. Warren (2016) found that graduates from an all-Black, male high school who were on track to graduate within six years from a college or university, credited the availability, patience, and caring of their teachers for helping them to achieve academically. The importance of supportive teachers was also found by other researchers of Black male achievers in secondary schools (Allen, 2014) and high-achieving Black students in math (McGee & Pearman, 2015).

Leaders can also recognize students for academic accomplishments, as we did at Cooper middle school. Several participants in Warren's (2016) study also credited the school's academic recognition through certificates and gifts with providing personal affirmation of their academic success. Because this recognition was done regularly, it held long-lasting meaning for the participants, who "articulated the importance of a schooling environment that regularly broadcasts what Black males are doing well, and maintains institutional systems/structures that reward progress" (p. 28).

### **Make Data-Informed Decisions About Academics and Disciplinary Practices**

Leaders must be taught how to examine disaggregated data to assess real versus perceived outcomes regarding the academic placement and discipline practices regarding Black boys. Instances of disproportionality, which often say more about the lack of equity within school structures, may contribute to deficit-laden narratives about Black boys. In order to counteract these existing narratives, leadership programs should prepare leaders in the skills of

data analysis and conducting, analyzing, and making decisions based on equity audits (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). Through the analysis of data collected for an equity audit (see Skrla et al., 2004), key stakeholders will see areas where Black males may be disproportionately represented. Key areas to explore are their placement in special education, gifted/talented education, and student discipline. It is likely that Black males are overrepresented in special education and student discipline yet underrepresented in gifted and talented education. Upon an analysis of the data, school leaders facilitate the creation of solutions and devise a plan for monitoring progress towards more equitable goals of academic and behavioral equity.

Additionally, behavior systems and practices that reduce the overrepresentation of Black males in school discipline are important. Positive behavior systems that use data to inform decision-making reduce classroom removal in response to many nonviolent misbehaviors. Staff are trained how to deescalate rather than escalate situations (Tobin & Vincent, 2011). At Cooper, our work to establish positive behavior support to reengage students who express negative behavior was also evident. Thankfully, David's teacher used encouragement to redirect his negative reaction to the recognition, rather than turning it into a power struggle, leading to him getting sent out and missing hearing his name. Scholars have introduced culturally responsive behavior support delivery models wherein staff increase their cultural awareness, support students with culturally relevant practices, and implement culturally responsive decision-making about student discipline which led to a decrease in discipline of minoritized student communities (for example, see Vincent et al., 2011).

Monroe (2005) offered specific recommendations to assist middle school educators to limit referrals of Black males for school discipline incidents. Teachers should: interrogate their beliefs about Black boys; implement culturally responsive discipline that do not only honor middle-class white norms; broaden discussion about discipline practices, such as creating discipline advisory boards where behavior incidents are discussed from multiple perspectives; and making instruction engaging for students. Although these recommendations are for teachers, school leaders who are responsible for the policies and practices that exist in their schools, should create cultures where these practices are expected and data is used to assess progress.

Khalifa et al. (2016) assert that culturally responsive school leaders use data to first, track gaps in academic and discipline trends. Secondly, leaders use the data to support, challenge, and possibly counsel out teachers who reinforce patterns of disproportionality. These patterns often exist in referrals to special education, remedial courses, or discipline, such as Black males who are often overrepresented in discipline referrals (Tobin & Vincent, 2011).

### **Reflective Discussion About Racism and Internal Biases**

Historically, the counternarrative of achievement created in the Black community “was the central meaning system that informed institutional life in these schools and to which its participants would be...socialized” (Perry, 2003, p. 93). In today's schools, this requires internal reflection, ongoing discussions, and decision-making that places the purposeful re-shaping of a narrative about Black boys at the center of reflective practice and planning. At minimum, school leaders must be willing to talk directly and honestly about race with faculty (Gooden & O'Dougherty, 2015; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009), and model the critical self-reflection necessary to “[come] to grips with his or her own identity and juxtaposing that against the identity of the learning community” (Dantley, 2005, p. 503). In the context of this article, leaders must examine their identity in relationship to the identities of Black males.

Ongoing school-wide discussions must include dialogue about the current narrative regarding Black males, because it is largely shaped by faculty's beliefs and practices. Exploring faculty beliefs is necessary because they in turn, shape decision-making about who gets access to rigorous coursework (Ford & Moore, 2013; Warren, 2016). An essential part of faculty reflection and discussion must be the extent to which Black males are viewed as resilient (Howard, 2013, 2014; Warren, 2016). Warren (2016) argued that "understanding Black males' resilience is central to how urban high schools academically prepare boys of color for multiple postsecondary pathways" (p. 2). Possible questions for a facilitated dialogue include probing the beliefs faculty hold regarding Black male potential, resilience, and achievement and how those beliefs and assumptions impact their classrooms (Khalifa et al., 2016; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Warren, 2016). For example, what are our academic expectations for Black males? Do we speak about them as achievers, or as problems? How do our protocols for student discipline and class placement contribute to a narrative about Black male student achievement? Popular protocols for such discussions, appropriate for both leadership preparation programs and practitioners, can be found in texts by Singleton and Linton (2006), and Terrell and Lindsey (2009). A popular text that can be used as a book study is edited by Pollock (2008).

Critical self-reflection about one's cultural background is an essential component of culturally responsive school leadership. This skill should be developed in leadership candidates in preparation programs through various activities such as cultural autobiographies and educational plunges (see Brown, 2004). Leaders should engage in critical self-reflection about race on an ongoing basis as they continually assess educational opportunities and outcomes for Black males.

## Conclusion

To be sure, the creation of a counternarrative for Black male achievement is more complex than simply "saying their names" and giving awards. The complexities of identifying systems that promote Black male success require that culturally responsive school leaders are prepared to assess and transform current narratives that reinforce Black males as deficits. Leaders must listen to the voices of their students in order to understand how best to serve, encourage, and prepare them academically (Rodriguez & Greer, 2017; Warren, 2016). Program faculty must incorporate the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions into curriculum and assessment to best ensure that candidates are prepared to contribute to a counternarrative about Black male students as academic achievers.

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