
8-17-2015

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Recommended APA Citation

Bell, E. E. (2015). Understanding African American Males' Schooling Experiences: A Qualitative Inquiry. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(8), 1260-1269. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2250>

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how African American males feel about their schooling experiences. Eighteen participants were selected for this inquiry. This study took place in eastern North Carolina. Many African American males lack early learning experiences to adequately prepare for a positive schooling experience. The findings from this study might prove helpful for working with African American males in an educational setting.

Keywords

Black Males, Graduation, Qualitative Research, Education

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Understanding African American Males' Schooling Experiences: A Qualitative Inquiry

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how African American males feel about their schooling experiences. This inquiry involved 18 participants located in eastern North Carolina. Many African American males lack early learning experiences to adequately prepare for a positive schooling experience. The findings from this study might prove helpful for working with African American males in an educational setting. Keywords: Black Males, Graduation, Qualitative Research, Education

African American males need early positive schooling experiences to prepare them for lifelong learning in the classroom, yet many African American males do not attend quality preschool programs or participate in early learning opportunities (McCall, 1993). These types of early childhood experiences might better prepare African American males for learning and foster a positive schooling experience. Rounds-Bryant (2008) concluded that "school is the first public place that many children get the opportunity to demonstrate mastery and competence outside of their family environment" (p. 27). In addition, Rounds-Bryant postulated that early failure in school typically leads to classroom frustration, academic withdrawal, and negative behavior. Most important, early academic successes might promote a long-lasting appreciation for schooling among African American males.

Literature Review

Historical Overview of African American Males

The experience of African American males in America is unlike any experience other immigrants have faced (Douglas, 2007). During slavery, African Americans were dehumanized and treated as inferior based solely on their skin color (Douglas; Anton, 2009). Even today, individuals discriminate against African American males by assuming they possess less-than-acceptable qualities, such as being lazy and irresponsible (Douglas; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). African American males may still be experiencing the residual effects of slavery, and their academic performance may be linked to biases (Douglas). Hallinan (2010) revealed that with "roots in history of slavery, civil war, and racial segregation, Black-White differences in social status and resources have been difficult to overcome" (p. 50). Hallinan further noted that for decades public schools enrolled primarily non-Black students, making it essentially illegal for African American students to read or write. Historically, African Americans have inherited generations of self-hatred and the looming effects of slavery (Douglas). Many African American males have internalized negative stereotypes about themselves, their appearance, and their abilities. As a result, these negative beliefs about the dominant culture may have impeded the academic potential of African American males (Douglas; Bell, 2009) and interfered with their overall ability to become successful in classrooms that yield a positive schooling experience.

School Experiences of African American Males

Fostering a positive schooling experience for African American males involves respecting them and valuing their classroom contributions (Bell, 2009, 2010). Many African American males lack adequate opportunities to develop positive classroom experiences. They are often berated for minor classroom behavioral issues that become magnified by teachers and administrators. This prevents an alarming number of African American males from positively engaging in the learning process. When this happens, African American males find their problems are often exacerbated by educators and taken more seriously as compared to those of White male offenders. This leads to a distortion of African American males' view of schooling and thus interferes with creating positive schooling experiences.

McLaren and Kincheloe (2007) posited the resistance theory as a means to help African American males compensate for complex educational issues. This theory provides a mechanism for understanding how African American males react to school conditions and helps to make meaning of how African American males respond to the school environment and policies (Noguera, 2001). African American males who attempt to voice their concerns regarding unfair treatment or combat negative school experiences are often seen as antisocial or harboring a negative view of schooling (Bell, 2009). Davis (2003) concluded in his research that to be Black and male in public school places one at risk for a disproportionate number of suspensions and a higher rate of school failure. For many African American males, school simply becomes a pipeline into the prison complex (Ferguson, 2000). Many factors contribute to this school-to-prison pipeline, including academic failure of students, disparate discipline practices, inadequate teaching, and high dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson 2005).

Views of Teachers

Teachers often view disruptive behavior by African American males as a catastrophic occurrence. When African American males are unjustly or unfairly singled out for classroom disruptions, they begin to develop an aversion towards the learning process. Consequently, this cripples them in forging a positive schooling experience. Majors and Billson (1992) concluded that African American males' behavior is often misinterpreted. Misinterpretation can cause educators to conclude that African American males are "thuggish" and that they harbor a dislike for learning, thereby creating an environment where African American males view school negatively and think teachers view them as lazy (Majors & Billson). Hereford (2012) revealed in her research that African American males are disproportionately suspended from school. The zero tolerance policy puts African Americans at a disadvantage; unlike their counterparts, they often not given receive another chance to stay in school. In addition, Caton (2012) noted an adverse impact of zero-tolerance policies when applied to Black males. Caton found that these policies created a negative school environment and poor student-teacher relationships for Black males, and this led to an inhospitable school environment.

Studies have shown that the needs of African American males are often not met within the public schools (Smith, 2005). Bennet (2006) and Brown (2004) concluded in their research that low teacher expectations and unequal disciplinary actions increase the negative perceptions that African American males have about their schooling experiences. Because of this, Freedman (2006) noted that African American males face a culture of exclusion within the public school system. Negative experiences that African American males have in school, such as low teacher expectations, tend to perpetuate the marginalization of African American males (Bennet). Adults working with students within the public school system fail to

understand how their “less-than” perception of African American males might contribute to how those students view their schooling experiences (Blanchet, Mumford, & Beachum (2005).

Gender and Culture

Researchers have worked to understand gender and education, particularly focusing on the effects of how gender interacts with education (Davis, 2013). However, researchers have given little attention to the interaction of gender and race as related to African American male achievement (Davis). African American males are often disadvantaged by how gender and race intersect; the relationship between the two is often misunderstood. Brown and Davis (2000) concluded in their research that schools are not meeting the social and developmental needs of African American males.

The culture of learning in most schools comes with expectations. Often the cultures at school and at home are at odds. Schools have a code of conduct that might be different from the code at home. In a national sample of 9,000 middle school students, 28.3% of African American males were suspended during a school year as opposed to 10% of White males being suspended (Losen & Skiba, 2010). These statistics might be attributed to the devaluing of African Americans and the misunderstanding of their conduct. African American males must come to appreciate school for its primary purpose, as a place to acquire an education; however, they have a mixed view of school given their historical challenges. Good and Brophy (1995) discussed factors that can be implemented to teach African American males ways to view school more positively, primarily that teachers must present clear and consistent roles for African American students and respond to crises fairly.

This researcher posited that the following strategies may produce a positive learning environment for African American males:

- Validate their presence and contributions to the class.
- See them as individuals and not representatives of a group.
- Treat them fairly and justly.
- Don't overreact to their misconduct.
- Expect them to succeed.

Given the urgency of the situation in trying to keep African American males in school and graduating, it seems ironic that scant attention has been given to the educational experiences and perspectives of African American males in school (Davis, 2013, p. 519). There is a paucity of research addressing how African American males feel about their schooling experiences. Understanding the feelings of African American males might help provide appropriate instructional interactions between student and teacher, which can translate into a positive schooling experience. This research is important in filling a gap in the existing literature. This study attempts to address how African American males feel about their schooling experiences. Although Bell (2009) studied African American males and the link between self-esteem and academic achievement, his quantitative research did not address the feelings of African American males. Significant research has studied the disengagement of Black males from school that translates into academic failure (Davis, 2013), yet minimal--if any--research exists that describes the feelings of African American males regarding their schooling experiences.

Researcher Stance

As an African American male, I strongly feel that additional research regarding the education of African American males is always needed. Because keeping African American males in school has become an urgent situation, it is important to understand how they feel about their schooling experiences. Qualitative research is best suited to understand and to explore the real-world experiences of African American males.

I have spent years trying to understand what I can do to better understand the feelings of African American males. Researchers and educators tend to look at numbers and rely on statistics, which is necessary. However, exploring and understanding personal experiences are strategies that I have used to help keep African American males in school, graduating from college, and living productive lives. It is the hope that this inquiry will lead to a better understanding of African American males. As a father of an African American male, I had to ask him repeatedly, "How do you feel about school?" Knowing his feelings prepared me to help him through difficult circumstances. Often, I became his best advocate to keep him focused on what he thought about school, and sometimes it was not positive. He was recently hired as an instructional coach in a rural school setting.

A qualitative researcher's bias should be made known (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the researcher, I am an African American male who currently works with this population as a community activist. In addition, I taught in a middle-school alternative program for at-risk males. These experiences add credibility to the findings.

Method

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to understand how African American males feel about their schooling experiences. This type of design is best suited to explore and understand the feelings of the study participants. Generic qualitative research is not based on a certain set of philosophical assumptions, but it is a method to gain information and to understand participants' lived experiences. It is important to hear the experiences of the participants. This design is explanatory in nature because it allows the researcher an opportunity to explore the feelings participants have about school.

Generic designs tend to focus on subjective attitudes, beliefs, or experiences. In general, qualitative research interprets human behaviors from the viewpoint of those who have experienced them (Milacci, 2003). Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in a situation "where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2001, p. 39).

Sample

The study participants were from a rural community in North Carolina. The study took place in the winter of 2009. The sample consisted of 18 African American males in grades 6-8. The sample for this study was selected utilizing snowballing, a subset of a purposive sampling method which is used when a researcher aims to understand and gain insight about a specific population (McMillian & Schumacher, 1997; Merriam, 1988).

Recruitment for the study occurred at a community event. One of organizers at the event shared a flyer which described the purpose of the study, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and informed the potential participants of the researcher's presence at the event. The organizer explained that the researcher might approach potential participants for study participation. The organizer stressed that participation was strictly voluntary and one could

withdraw at any time. During the community event, the researcher approached 18 adults who were accompanied by a minor. The researcher inquired about the potential parent-child relationship and the grade of the child. Once the parent-child relationship was determined, the researcher explained the nature of the study to the parent while the child listened. The potential participants were given detailed information about the study such as its purpose and procedures; participants were invited to participate in the study if the criteria were met; participants verbally agreed to participate in the study; and participants were told they could withdraw at time from the study and that their participation was strictly voluntary. Participating parents and children signed consent forms.

It was important that this research study adhere to ethical procedures and standards as set by All of the Children, Inc., an organization that focuses on the needs of youth. Without approval from this organization's research arm, the study could not have been conducted. This organization supported, reviewed, and approved the study to ensure that participants were not exposed to any harm and to ensure ethical standards were met.

Data Collection

Creswell (2000) noted that analyzing text and forms of data presents a challenge, especially for qualitative researchers. One-to-one semistructured interviews were used to collect the naturalistic data. The focus of the study was to explore and understand the feelings of African American males regarding their schooling experiences. A total of 18 African American males were included in this study. The principal source of data for the study was generated by semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews involve interaction between researcher and respondent. The particulars of the study were discussed with the parent, such as the nature and reason for the study. The researcher explained the right of refusal to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. Subsequently, the parent gave the researcher permission to speak with the minor child. In addition, the researcher ensured the parent and the participant that no name would be used in the study. The parent verbally agreed to allow the minor child to participate in the study and then signed a consent form. The researcher informed the parent that the participant could withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher used this approach with all study participants. Participants' parents were also helpful in recommending other potential participants for the study.

Qualitative researchers, the key instrument in data collection, present findings from field notes and interviews. This study employed this process and provided detailed accounts called descriptive narratives (McMillian & Schamacher, 1997). The researcher's field notes enhanced the validity of the research. It is important for qualitative researchers to highlight participant meanings, which ultimately provides evidence that clarifies the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

This study took place over a 3-month period; the semistructured interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. To protect the identity of the participants, the researcher assigned each one a number. Participants were asked questions such as, "How do you feel about school?" When necessary, follow-up questions were asked, such as, "Could you tell me more?"

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collection can produce data in the form of interviews or oral surveys. To analyze the data effectively, the researcher used open coding and axial procedures that allowed the emergence of common themes by naming, categorizing, and describing

phenomena (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study also used grounded theory methods for the emergence of inductive codes through the collection and analysis of the data. This approach promoted marking of salient points from the text as well as the emergence of themes. The analysis of the field notes from the interviews produced data relevant to the semistructured interviews. Collected data will be secured and retained on a USB flash drive; only the researcher will have access to the drive. Data will be destroyed after 7 years.

To ensure the trustworthiness and creditability of the findings, the researcher used member checking and peer examination in the study. Data triangulation of multiple data sources such as member checking, peer examination, and field notes enhanced validity of the research. For example, after the interviews, the researcher shared respective notes with each participant; this allowed participants the opportunity to validate their experience (Koelsch, 2013). The ultimate goal of member checking is establish truth (Cho & Trent, 2006).

In addition, after coding and analyzing the data, two professionals with over 30 years of combined experience in child development and educating African American males reviewed the data for credibility, thus bringing their expertise into the analysis. This strategy allowed the researcher to further understand the data and code refining. Maxwell (2010) stated that feedback from others is helpful in identifying assumptions and flaws in methods.

Results

The analysis revealed two key themes: feelings about school and feelings about teachers. Students had mixed reactions to their views on schooling. They enjoyed coming to school but faced some negative experiences there. When this happened, some of them wanted to drop out of school and others became classroom disruptions. In particular, one of the respondents felt that “school was not teaching him anything.” Other comments follow:

Theme 1: Feelings about School

- “I like school. Man, I am doing my best.”
- “I am trying to work harder.”
- “I am good most times in school...ain’t dropping out of school. You know they [teachers] want us to.”
- “We are trying to [do] good in school, and I want to be rich.”
- “School can be fun...I get up early for school.”
- “Meeting your friends in school is the best part...all the laughs.”
- “School is better than staying home all day...it is no fun being sick and home...rather be in school.”
- “It’s hard being in school when you are not wanted.”
- “School can be good...I feel that my teacher makes it worse.”

Theme 2: Feelings about Teachers

Participants’ views on teachers were primarily negative. It is interesting to note they were fond of going to school, yet they disliked the teachers. Teachers were often viewed as “mean” and “controlling.” The issue of race was discussed. Some of the respondents felt that they were “policed” more than other students. However, some of the participants noted the kindness of teachers and that “some of them [are] willing to help you.” “Just don’t make them mad,” one respondent stated. Additional comments follow:

- “Teachers are mean.”
- “I can’t get away with anything...but the Whites do.”
- “Some [teachers] are nice to you.”
- “Look, I am nice and they still are mean, so what do you do?”
- “They [teachers] are nice to the White students.”
- “As soon as I break a rule, I am in trouble...This doesn’t happen for everybody, just us Black kids.”
- “One time, you see, I was nice, and she [the teacher] still was hating on me.”
- “It is hard to decide if teachers really care about you...some never smile.”
- “I know my math teacher likes me...he takes his time with me.”
- “Well, my science teacher is nice sometimes, but she will flip on you quick.”
- “When I was late for class, my social studies teacher didn’t even explain what I missed, but when another student was late, she did.”
- “As soon as I say something, I get in trouble...those White boys never get in trouble.”
- “They try to trick us and get us in trouble.”
- “Why do we get sent to the office when we misbehave? The White kids don’t, and our behaviors are the same.”
- “I can’t even make a sound...I get sent to the office.”
- “I feel that school could be better if teachers just treated us fair.”

Discussion

African American males must develop and embrace a positive schooling experience. It is important for educators to understand how African American males feel about school. Bell (2009) concluded in this research that positive feelings about school may contribute to academic growth. Most important, African American males are often made to feel inferior, which may also translate into a negative perception of school. This can hamper the learning potential of African American males (Bell, 2009; Steele, 1992; Swanson et al., 2003). African American students have a history marred by underachievement and low expectations, coupled with practices and measures that systematically place African American males at risk academically (Anton, 2009; Bell, 2010; Douglas, 2007).

Majors and Billson (1992) posited that some educators seem to overreact to African American males’ behavior and become overly dramatic when they go against the normalcy of classroom conduct. If educators could respond less dramatically to the behavior of African American males and eliminate stereotypes and biases, this might increase positive schooling experiences for this group of students (Majors & Billson). The nuances of their behavior, race, and gender can place African American males at risk academically and add to their negative perceptions of school. Some educators lack the cultural disposition to understand the feelings and experiences of African American males (Steele, 1992) and often overreact when African American males present challenging behavior; however, when non-African American students display the same behavior, educators do little to correct them and respond in a nonchalant manner. Steele concluded in his research that beliefs of inferiority and low expectations mar African American male students. As a result, these students will continue to fall prey to suspensions, low test scores, and academic failure (Bell, 2009, 2010) and unfortunately will also continue to harbor a negative view of school.

This study looked at how African American students experience school. Their feelings about school were often tied to how teachers saw them. They were concerned about how teachers viewed them. Often a bad day in school caused them to believe that they disliked school. Participants enjoyed going to school. Teachers' reactions were often negative and contributed to African American males feeling unhappy about being in a classroom where they were not respected or valued. Students tended to like school for social and academic reasons; however, their negative views of teachers interfered with their overall view of school. For many of them, this created negative feelings toward teachers and school.

Implications

Davis (2003) stated that Black boys need positive schooling experiences to keep them engaged in school. Rounds-Bryant (2008) revealed that African American males need earlier school experiences that are positive, and she noted that such experiences might insulate African American males from negative views of schooling. Although there is some research that has studied the schooling experiences of African American males, there appears to be a lack of research that addresses the feelings of African American males regarding their schooling experiences.

The practical implications of the proposed study can assist in filling the gap on understanding how African American males feel about their schooling experiences. The results of the study may assist teachers, school administrators, school counselors, and parents to better address the academic needs of African American males and assist in keeping them in school through graduation.

Conclusion

African American males must develop positive schooling experiences. Having positive schooling experiences will undoubtedly keep African American males in school. However, African American males must feel free to be who they are: young men who possess unique qualities and abilities. Inappropriate responses to their behavior cause them to react negatively and to develop a trajectory of unhealthy associations with schooling. Perhaps African American males need earlier educational experiences where teachers intentionally make them feel valued for who they are. More important, African American males need to be valued, respected, and made to feel that they too are a welcome addition to any classroom. This might ward off potential dislike for school when confronted with the stereotypes, opinions, prejudice, and biases of others.

Given the aforementioned needs of African American males, the current education landscape might be ill-equipped to deal with the needs of African Americans. Professional development has begun to offer teachers strategies for implementing effective classroom lessons.

There is an absence of tools that assess the feelings of African American males in the classroom. If teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and other educational leaders can more easily assess and evaluate the feelings of African American males, their findings might enable them to keep this population in school and successfully graduating. These efforts have the potential to abate the negative feelings that African Americans have about their schooling experiences--and keep them in school and graduating.

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Author Note

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Article Citation

Bell, E. E. (2015). Understanding African American males' school experiences: A qualitative inquiry. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(8), 1260-1269. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/8/bell6.pdf>
