

In His Name: Rigor and Relevance in Research on African American Males in Education

Shaun R. Harper*
University of Pennsylvania

The launch of the *Journal of African American Males in Education* is significant for several reasons, not the least of which is that it offers an intellectual venue for the engagement of critical issues concerning a population that is continually underserved by the majority of American schools, colleges, and universities. I am honored to have been invited to serve on the JAAME advisory board and author this preface for the inaugural issue. Indeed, J. Luke Wood, T. Kenyatta Jones, and their editorial leadership team should be saluted for responding purposefully to the need for evidence-based change on behalf of African American boys and men in education. Particularly praiseworthy is the vision that compelled their creation of this journal as well as the time and effort required to solicit cutting-edge manuscripts, recruit an all-star advisory board, and manage the technical delivery of a high-quality publication. I read and publish in several academic journals – as I see it, none are presently more important than JAAME.

My excitement and appreciation for JAAME are only surpassed by the height of my expectation for its rigor and relevance. I often make the point that no African American male student rises to low expectations. In this same way, I maintain here that the impact of the Journal depends on an enormously high expectation that prospective authors will submit methodologically rigorous, conceptually complex, theoretically sophisticated, and socially important manuscripts that help (re)shape education policy and practice. Anything short of this, I am afraid, will do little to disrupt the slow pace with which teachers, administrators, and policymakers foster the conditions necessary for correcting past and present wrongs in education. Current challenges concerning African American boys and men demand the publication and dissemination of *good* social science research that will oblige decision-makers and resource

Shaun R. Harper is on the faculty in the Graduate School of Education, Africana Studies, and Gender Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Best known for his research on African American male college access and achievement, Dr. Harper has published eight books and more than 60 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and other academic publications. His newest book is *College Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Implications for Practice*.

managers to do all that is necessary to respond swiftly to forces that episodically reproduce educational and social disadvantage.

Over the past decade, African American men (mostly in postsecondary education) have been at the center of my academic activities. For an even longer time period, I have held membership in the population about which I most often write (as have my father, partner, two brothers, 29 cousins, numerous mentees, and closest friends). Thus, I care deeply about the African American male and his access to high-quality schooling, college opportunity, and social advancement. In recent years I have been simultaneously encouraged and troubled by the attention he has received in the public domain. Sessions at educational conferences have been devoted to him, as have think tanks, newspaper and magazine articles, books (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Cuyjet, 2006; Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2008; Polite & Davis, 2003), and policy reports (e.g., Harper, 2010a; Schott Foundation, 2008; Toldson, 2008). Having read all these publications and participated in many public conversations about the African American male, I, like some others (i.e., Jackson & Moore III, 2008), have become increasingly skeptical of new efforts undertaken in his name. Frankly, I wonder what additional research, dialogue, and media attention will do to improve educational attainment and social outcomes for the African American male – if nothing, then why continue? Why start a new journal in his name?

It is my hope and expectation that JAAME will instantly become, yet extend beyond, a mere conversation catalyst on underserved boys and men in education. Necessary for change is the igniting of critical consciousness, the publication of new insights concerning this population, and a commitment to connecting the good research published in JAAME to education policy and practice. In my most recent journal article, *Niggers No More: A Critical Race Counternarrative on Black Male Student Achievement at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities* (Harper, 2009), I argue that the same questions regarding African American males in education (e.g., why they do so poorly and why they drop out at such high rates) are continually recycled by education researchers. On the one hand, the pursuit of these questions remains important so long as racial and gender disparities are cyclically manufactured in American schools and colleges. But on the other, I would like to see JAAME counterbalance its publication of these types of articles with others that offer a more hopeful and instructive view of African American male educational achievement. Much remains to be learned from those boys and men who, despite all that has been stacked against them, manage to thrive and persist through high school graduation, baccalaureate degree attainment, and even into graduate studies. I am arguing here, as I have done elsewhere (see Harper 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007), that researchers who endeavor to improve African American male success in education should commit at least a fraction of their intellectual efforts to studying those within the race who have earned good grades, avoided trouble and school suspension, assumed leadership positions on their campuses, responded productively to racist stereotypes, resolved masculine identity conflicts, amassed social capital they previously lacked, and negotiated same-race peer support for their school achievement.

In addition to anti-deficit and achievement-oriented scholarship on the African American male, I would like to see JAAME publish much of the following in his name:

Policy Informing Research – More studies are needed to inform the practices of teachers, K-12 school administrators, postsecondary leaders, social workers, and community resource providers, as well as parents of African American boys. What these

persons do surely will have lasting effects on African American male educational achievement. But so too will decisions that local, state, and federal legislators make regarding the regulatory oversight of educational systems, the allocation of fiscal and human resources, and the replication of effective interventions that enable school success. On their own, those engaged in practice (including parents) cannot do all that is required to halt sociopolitical engines that sustain educational inequity. Thus, those of us who publish in JAAME and elsewhere must offer bold, yet sensible implications for practice *and* policy.

Critical Race Scholarship – Smith, Allen, and Danley’s (2007) study offers insights into the racist educational environments that African American males often encounter. Other researchers have used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to critique claims of meritocracy, give voice to African American males who have experienced racism, and show how white persons and educational systems would benefit from increased investments in African American male achievement (e.g., Donnor, 2005; Harper, 2009, 2010b; Harper et al., in press; Howard, 2008; Lynn, 2002; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007). Additional CRT studies are needed to illuminate the perpetuation of racism and its toxic effects on African American males in education. JAAME authors who elect to employ CRT should not limit its use to experiential examinations. Also essential are critical analyses of the law and education policies. Future studies that attempt to explain racial disparities should not do so without critically exploring the possible presence and harmful consequences of racism.

Studies of Racial Heterogeneity and Intersecting Identities – In the title of our 2008 article, Dr. Andrew H. Nichols and I asked, “Are they not all the same?” Our multi-institution study of African American male undergraduates revealed tremendous within-group diversity. Even though I have written in this preface about “*the* African American male” and research published “in *his* name,” I recognize there is no singular notion of this identity group. Hence, I would encourage JAAME authors to consider the myriad ways in which being an African American male is experienced in educational spaces. Not all are the same – some are bisexual middle class student-athletes from rural home communities, while others are lower-income, Muslim, heterosexual fraternity members from large U.S. cities. Undoubtedly, members of these identity groups sometimes experience education differently. Understanding and acknowledging such variation will enable researchers to offer more complex analyses of educational environments and inclusive implications for policy and practice. Also necessary are additional studies that explore identity convergence – for example, how someone experiences, performs, and makes sense of being African American and White (biracial), Christian, masculine, and gay all at once.

Complex Analyses of Social Systems – Inherent in its title, JAAME clearly focuses on schools, colleges, universities, and other venues in which education occurs. Notwithstanding, I urge authors who publish research in the name of African American males to consider how schools, familial and community forces, economic conditions, disease and healthcare, and criminal injustice collide to explain their educational underperformance and attitudinal/behavioral responses to schooling. Although teachers and school administrators are often complicit in the marginalization of African American

males, their actions alone are not altogether responsible for the social subordination of this group. Therefore, future studies must interrogate how education systems interface with other drivers of social inequity. Education research as a lone analytical lens will not fully reveal the undercurrents of African American men's troubled status in schools and society.

Philosophical Statements on African American Male Education – William Edward Burghardt Du Bois has long been my favorite philosopher and intellectual hero. It would be good of JAAME to become a venue where unusually wise, thought-provoking statements on the education of African American males were routinely published. What I am advocating here differs from editorial claims based largely on opinion and weak evidence. To clarify this distinction, I would like the Journal to be a place where large, critical, and socially complex questions concerning educational purpose and values are posed. Ideally, these philosophical positions would compel architects and maintainers of educational systems to rethink their assumptions about African American males in general and schooling structures in particular. The elusive quest for racial justice in education requires guidance from contemporary versions of Du Bois and other past philosophers of Black education. I hope they view JAAME as a suitable home for the publication of their big, envelope-pushing ideals.

I recognize the vision and expectations I have conveyed here are enormous. But what I have called for in this preface is what I believe researchers and JAAME writers should do to help improve school achievement, educational attainment, and social advancement for the African American male. I am confident that JAAME can supply the evidence-based insights that are required to stimulate change in policy and practice. Again, I congratulate its editorial team on the publication of this first issue. I am optimistic that the Journal will be a good steward of his name.

References

- Anderson, A. (2008). *Against the wall: Poor, young, Black, and male*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cuyjet, M. J. (2006). African American college men: Twenty-first century issues and concerns. In M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *African American men in college* (pp. 3-23). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Donnor, J. K. (2005). Towards an interest-convergence in the education of African American football student-athletes in major college sports. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 45-67.
- Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Harper, S. R. (2004). The measure of a man: Conceptualizations of masculinity among high-achieving African American male college students. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 48(1), 89-107.
- Harper, S. R. (2006a). Peer support for African American male college achievement: Beyond internalized racism and the burden of “acting White.” *Journal of Men’s Studies*, 14(3), 337-358.
- Harper, S. R. (2006b). Enhancing African American male student outcomes through leadership and active involvement. In M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *African American men in college* (pp. 68-94). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Harper, S. R. (2008). Realizing the intended outcomes of *Brown*: High-achieving African American male undergraduates and social capital. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(7), 1029-1052.
- Harper, S. R. (2009). Niggers no more: A critical race counternarrative on Black male student achievement at predominantly white colleges and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(6), 697-712.
- Harper, S. R. (2010a). *The 2010 report on Black male students in public higher education*. Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.
- Harper, S. R. (2010b). Race, interest convergence, and transfer outcomes for Black male student-athletes at community colleges. In S. R. Harper & F. Harris III (Eds), *College men and masculinities: Theory, research, and implications for practice* (pp. 494-503). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Harper, S. R., Davis, R. J., Jones, D. E., McGowan, B. L., Ingram, T. N., & Platt, C. S. (In press). Race and racism in the experiences of Black male resident assistants at predominantly white universities. *Journal of College Student Development*.
- Harper, S. R., & Nichols, A. H. (2008). Are they not all the same? Racial heterogeneity among Black male undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(3), 199-214.
- Harper, S. R., & Quaye, S. J. (2007). Student organizations as venues for Black identity expression and development among African American male student leaders. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(2), 133-159.
- Howard, T. C. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in pre K-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 110(5), 954-985.
- Jackson, J. F. L., & Moore III, J. L. (2008). The African American male crisis in education: A popular media infatuation or needed public policy response? *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(7), 847-853.
- Lynn, M. (2002). Critical race theory and the perspectives of Black men teachers in the Los Angeles public schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 35(2), 87-92.
- Noguera, P. A. (2008). *The trouble with Black boys and other reflections on race, equity, and the future of public education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Polite, V. C., & Davis, J. E. (Eds.). (2003). *African American males in school and society: Practices and policies for effective education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2008). *Given half a chance: The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black males*. Cambridge, MA: Author.
- Smith, W. A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L. L. (2007). Assume the position... you fit the description: Psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(4), 551-578.
- Smith, W. A., Yosso, T. J., & Solórzano, D. G. (2007). Racial primes and black misandry on historically white campuses: Toward critical race accountability in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(5), 559-585.
- Toldson, I. A. (2008). *Breaking barriers: Plotting the path to academic success for school-age African American males*. Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.