Perceptions of Success Factors that Influence Positive Educational/Vocational Attitudes of Inner-City Black Males: Some Considerations for School Leaders

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Introduction

The problem is how to determine factors influencing the perception of success for Black males who started the race behind other ethnic groups in America (Hacker, 1995). Schultz (1969) wrote a book, *Coming up Black: Patterns of Ghetto Socialization*. In his book, he stated that poverty hinders progress because it truly handicaps Blacks by giving them an unequal playing field. Schultz (1969) further stated that inner-city youths, especially Black males, have a struggle. He contended that the young inner-city males do not have fathers or positive male role models, which increases the likelihood of failure. Therefore, many Black males turn to the streets to survive to get an education about life. Unfortunately, the street help some Black males form the wrong perception of what success should be (Shakur, 1993). Shakur, for example, was an original gangster. He grew up in Los Angeles as a member of the notorious crips gang. He stated that the gang became his family and his source of strength (Shakur, 1993). Unfortunately, this is the case for so many Black males growing up in the inner-city. How do they break this cycle? What happens to make them change their thought patterns, perceptions and help them strive for educational and vocational success? What are the factors that inner-city Black males feels manifest success? For black males like Shakur, it was jail. For many other Black males it learned helpless behavior. They feel that no matter what they do the outcome will be the same. Fortunately, many of young Black males find success through athletics and entertainment (Green, 1995). However, every inner-city child will not grow up to be a Michael Jordan, a Magic Johnson, or a Wilt Chamberlain (Dickerson & Delsohn, 1986). Still, some young Black males reach success despite the odds of growing up in the inner-city by overcoming poverty and crime through post-secondary educational training, either collegiately or vocationally (Bowser & Perkins, 2000). Education is the one thing that cannot be taken away from them. The literature has suggested that success in school is a prerequisite for maximizing life chances and taking advantages of new opportunities presented to be successful education, professional and vocationally.

Review of the Literature

Inner-city Life and Its Image

There is traffic everywhere and the people are crowded together in small areas. There may be a fight; there may be music or a gathering of young people snapping on each other (Fable, 1994). The inner-cities are overpopulated and, in almost every city, there is also at least one place called an urban area, which is also notoriously known as a ghetto. A ghetto is defined as “a section of a city, especially a thickly populated slum area, inhabited predominately by members of a minority group, often as a result of social and economic restrictions” (Jargowsky & Bane, 1991). What would a family from the suburbs see when they ride through an inner-city? When they enter the heart of the city, they would notice congestion and despair (Schulz, 1969). Symbolically, the inner-city is like having a million people trapped in a bank vault with no windows or air conditioning.

Role Models of the Young Black Men In the Inner-City
With Black males growing up in a life of transition and trouble, it seems that a young man would find it almost impossible to find a positive role model to help them develop positive perceptions of educational and vocational success. Some social scientist and Black leaders have stated that mothers can be positive role models for male children; nevertheless, writers such as Raspberry have contended that matriarchal households are detrimental to the development of the masculine characteristics in young Black males (Staples & Johnson, 1993). Thus, young men may look elsewhere for a role model. Kotlowitz (1987) in his book *There are no child here* tells a story about a mother raising two boys in the inner-city. Their father was never around and their mother has played the role of mother and father. Although the mother was the primary caregiver and role model, she could not satisfy her children’s need to have a male role model. Therefore, the youngest boy looked up to his older brother who became the child’s father figure and role model. In the Black community, most young Black males identify with older adolescents who are popular athletes in neighborhoods and schools. Most of the young Black males want to be athletes when they grow up and they often imitate famous athletes when they are playing games in their neighborhoods (Schultz, 1969). Edwards (2000) stated that in the Black communities children are pushed to have male role models and to participate in sports. He contended that is important to promote education for our youth and to find other examples of success, because there are some positive and negative role models that are athletes. Edwards contends that we need more positive Black males in education to instill more realistic perception about education and vocation to young Black males.

An autobiography by Shakur (1993), whose gang name is Monster Kody Scott, stated that he loved his mother and that she was a positive role model in his life, but his need to be more powerful than the next man in the neighborhood overrode her love and affection for him. The veterans of the gang became his role models. He stated that he lived for the gang and would have died for his gang. He stated that streets/gangs promoted violence and street education. He stated that he wish he had someone to help guide and lead him in the right direction regarding his education. He stated that he thought school was for nerds so his perception of education was tainted. Kunfuju (2004) stated that our Black males need role models in the following areas: African and American History, economics, politics, family responsibilities, career development, spirituality, community involvement, and physical development. Kunfuju (2004) discussed the importance of positive role models and he felt that role models play a pivotal part in the psychological, physical development and educational and vocational perceptions of young Black males. In a book called *Coming up Black*, Schultz (1968) noted that young Black men in the inner-cities and ghettos grow up in a world where role models are pimps, drug dealers, and athletes. Unfortunately, a guy who grows up in the inner-city and sees the fancy cars, pretty women, and the respect that negative men get in the neighborhoods, they mistakenly identify the popularity and materialistic gains as positive. Unfortunately, many Black males chase street money and repress/suppress their thoughts about education In the book *True to the game* written by Fable (1994), stated that he had to follow the gangsters to stay true to the game.

Black men have become obsolete in their communities and this could potentially leading younger Black children down the wrong paths in life. Historically, black men have disappeared from their children’s lives because of homosexuality, imprisonment, lack of responsibility, and the inability to maintain regular employment. The decrease in Black men in families and society has created a limited number of positive role models for the young Black men of tomorrow (Madhubuti, 1990). Kunfuju (1986) postulated a more radical theory about the plight of young black males. He stated that there is a
conspiracy to destroy our Black males in the educational settings. Kunfuju (2005) stated that ‘if we cannot do a better job of developing Africa American boys to reach their fullest potential, then he recommended an extreme solution–the creation of a Black male classroom’. The major components of the Black classroom would include: black male teachers, twenty to twenty-four students per class, cooperative learning, SETCLAE curriculum, physical education, nutritious daily meals, science lab, martial arts training, phonics, musical instrument, whole brain lesson plans and test, math word problems, junior business league, corporate sponsors for summer employment, academic contest and assemblies, monthly parenting meetings, and a chess club. Kunfuju (2005) stated that many social scientists would disagree with all black male classrooms because this promotes segregation. Over seventy-five percent of black males are in special education classes. Kunfuju (2005) stated that this was part of the conspiracy to segregate and destroy Black males. In this study, attention was focused on the inner-city and its effects on young Black males.

**Purpose of the study:**

The purpose of this study was to determine which factors increased the probability/perception for success of young Black males growing up in the inner-city. Family and education appeared to be important success markers for many young Black males. As such, the results of this study may help social scientists, parents, educators, and other significant individuals understand the struggles of how young Black males from the inner cities achieve educational and vocational success.

**Results and Discussion:**

**Research Design**

This study used a descriptive design method to examine qualitative data about Black males raised in the inner-city. This research design was based on data received from a series of interview questions and guided discussion. Black males between the ages of 18-42 years old were asked to participate voluntarily in this study. The design was chosen to help inform and instruct the researcher about the struggles, obstacles and trials of the inner-city lives of Black males. However, the study identified the positive influences that increase the probability of success for young Black males reared in the inner-city. According to Cash (2002), descriptive research consists of observation and the collection of data without trying to manipulate any conditions or circumstances being observed or discussed. Descriptive research is a passive observation of the topics being investigated. In this case, it was success markers for Black males growing up in the inner-city. Cash (2002) indicate that descriptive studies are good for developing new theories and hypotheses and are often the first step for researchers investigating things that haven’t been studied much.

**Selection of Participants**

A convenient sample was utilized in this study. The participants were randomly approached and asked a series of questions based on convenience and willingness to participate in this study. The males were individuals that grew up in the inner-city areas of Richmond, Virginia. The males were between the ages of 22-35 years old. The Black males were all briefed about the nature of this research and that their participation is voluntary.

**Assumptions and limitations**
The interviews were based on the assumption that participants would respond honestly. The researcher randomly chose Black males to participate in this study. The researcher interviewed Black males who grew up in the inner-city. The study was limited because the participants were limited to Black males who have grown up in the inner-city but now reside in Richmond, Virginia who may not be a representative sample of the population of young inner-city Black males in the United States. Other limitations may include those usually associated with self-administered tests. Furthermore, this study was descriptive in nature and therefore no causal interpretation can be made only response patterns, themes and similarities.

**Procedures**

In this study, the researcher randomly approached Black males to ask them to voluntarily participate in this study. The researchers asked them two questions to determine if they were eligible to participate in this study. Were you raised in the inner-city? If they answer “yes”, then they were asked where they were raised. If they were raised in an inner-city, they were eligible to participate in this study. Data was collected from the 60 participants through the locus of control and interviews that consisted of a series of questions, which generated more questions to further enhance the validity and reliability of the study. The interviewer conducted a semi-structures guided interview. The questions utilized provided standardization and uniformity. All participants were asked the same questions and be given the same twenty-nine questions from the locus of control test. Sometimes, follow up questions were asked based on the direction of the interview to explore relevant variables, factors and themes. The interviewer used a non-intrusive approach in asking questions, but many of the questions were personal questions. The researcher was very polite and respectful and did not push to get more details regarding the questions that were answered. The researcher provided a calm, relaxed approach that guided the participants to emit and disclose information based on the questions that were asked.

**Research Question**

What were the factors that influence young Black males growing up in the inner-city that help define success? The findings revealed a consistent pattern in the way the participants in this study viewed the influences that help them define success from an inner-city perspective. The participants stated that growing up in the inner-city was a hard endeavor. The participants appear to feel that the inner-city experience shaped them as men. When interviewing many of the participants, they stated that the interview questions “took them back down memory lane of their childhood and inner-city life”. It appeared that for some the memories where positive and for others the memories were negative based on their responses. Many of the young men grew up without fathers. Many of the young men lack education. Many of the young men lack jobs. Many of the young men have used drugs and they received criminal charges at young ages. It seemed that although they lacked a lot, they did not lack the drive to succeed and overcome the odds of the inner-city life. It seemed that they all possess a positive person that influenced their lives that was the catalyst for them trying to excel, succeed, and do well in life vocationally and educationally. In the study, the researcher asked the participants the question: **Who influenced your life the most to help you define your perception of educational and vocational success?**

**Interviewee number 1:** My sister is my heart because she took me in and raised me along with her children and did not treat me differently. I love her to death for stepping up when my mother passed
away. She taught me about success and watching her made me better I believe.

**Interviewee number 2: My friends** influenced me the most about success. As I look back many that influenced me where negative. They encouraged me to cut school. Unfortunately, these influences were negative.

**Interviewee number 3: My mother** because she always pushed me in school and motivated me to do better. I believe that without my mom I would not be in college. She wants me in college because she knows the struggles I would have in life without a college education.

**Interviewee number 4: My coaches** because they helped me play ball and kept me focused when I listened. I want to play professional football. I am older but I am going to try hard to get there.

**Interviewee number 5: Me** because I never listened to anyone anyway.

**Interviewee number 6: My mother and grandmother** influenced me to try to do the best I can. It was a struggle but they stayed on me all the time.

**Interviewee number 7: My mother** influenced me the most in my life because she taught me to be independent and to go after what I want in life.

**Interviewee number 8: Growing up it was my dad**. He showed me that if you set your mind to something anything is possible. He was my mentor, my role model and the motivator for me to do well.

**Interviewee number 9: My mother** as I stated above influenced my life the most. She was the epiphany of a hard working woman that struggled and sacrificed for the well-being of her children. She was an inspiration and just a Blessing in my life.

**Interviewee number 10: My homeboy** that is opposite of me. He is 28 years old and went to college and he just stayed out of trouble and he is from the same hood.

The research question looked at the factors that influenced their lives as Black males growing up in the inner-city that helped them become successful professionally, educationally and vocationally. The young men interviewed in this study appeared to have an innate drive or a push form some positive in their lives to push that drive for success. They appeared to have a drive to rid the stigmas of the inner-city life. The participants had the drive and revealed to the interviewer that positive role models, family, goals, drive, dedication, determination and hard work were the factors that must be exhibited in order to overcome the inner-city odds to excel and succeed educationally and vocationally in life beyond the inner-city experience. The findings indicated that family, love, role models, positive outlooks/perceptions, vocation, education, goal setting, avoidance of gang, drugs, and not having children at a young age were the factors that appear to help inner-city males develop into successful positive young men in society and define their views of success.

**Conclusion**

This research question looked at the factors/variables that influenced young Black males growing up in the inner-city define educational and vocational success. Many inner-city males grow up in homes without fathers or in environments that are not stable but they still have dreams and goals to be success
educationally and vocationally. The majority interviewees in this study grew up in a home without a father. The findings indicated the variables that help define success were a positive family, love, role models, vocation, education, goal setting, staying focused, avoid gang affiliation, avid drug use, no criminal record, and not having children at a young age. These variables helped manifest the goals and spearheaded our Inner-city Black males develop into successful positive young men in society despite the insurmountable odds. The purpose of this study was to identify some of the important variables influencing the perceptions of Black male’s educational/vocational success and determined variables that in increased probability of life success for young Black males growing up in the inner-city. Family and education were the primary success markers for many of the young Black males when shaping and molding their ideology/perception of educational and vocational success. As such, the results of this study may help social scientists, parents, Black males, educators, and other significant individuals understand the struggles of young Black males growing up in the inner-city.

References


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