

“I Was Just Trying to Make It”: Examining Urban Black Males’ Sense of Belonging, Schooling Experiences, and Academic Success

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Derrick R. Brooms¹

Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the schooling experiences of 20 young Black men who graduated from Douglass Academy, an all-boys public charter secondary school in a large urban city. Specifically, I explore how these students construct meaning from their school experiences and their efforts for academic success. The students articulated two critical components of their school experience that positively shaped their achievement and success: (a) school culture and (b) relationships. The student narratives provide a frame for promoting positive school culture that increases the sense of belonging, educational experiences, and academic aspirations of African American male students.

Keywords

Black males, belonging, school culture, relationships, academic success

I didn’t even know what a GPA was when I first got to high school; I was just trying to make it!

—Darryl

¹University of Louisville, KY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Derrick R. Brooms, Department of Sociology, College of Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville, 118 Lutz Hall, Louisville, KY 40292, USA.
Email: dr.brooms@louisville.edu

The participation, retention, and academic achievement of Black males in education are salient topics in the research literature (Davis, 2003; Harper & Associates, 2014; McGee, 2013; Toldson & Lewis, 2012). In urban education in particular, structural and systemic inequalities, such as available resources, teaching practices, and administrative leadership (Milner & Lomety, 2014), challenge students' educational experiences, identity development, and success (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Harper & Davis, 2012). These challenges, and the responses to them, revealed that more research is needed to scrutinize the urban educational environments where Black students are engaged in both community-based education settings (Baldrige, 2014; Woodland, 2008) and traditional schools (Davis, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2014). As researchers have noted, school environments play an important role in how students are socialized toward education and educational attainment (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010; Milner, 2007; Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). As is reflected by Darryl in the opening epigraph of this article, many young Black men enter high schools unsure of their place or belonging, and they simply are trying to survive. They are unfamiliar with the school culture, they struggle to adjust to different academic expectations, and they are just "trying to make it." This sense of survival and desire for success works to demarcate their initial entrée into secondary school for many young Black males and plays a factor in determining the ways in which they navigate their schooling experience—which ultimately affects their in-school relationships, both among teachers and peers alike, and how they conceptualize the possibilities of their success. Easily, as expressed by many of the participants in this study, the school environment and what the school reflects to them are critical factors in how students see themselves and envision their futures.

To contribute to the extant literature, I examine qualitative interview data from 20 Black male students who all graduated from Douglass Academy (pseudonym), an all-boys public charter secondary school located in a large urban city. The primary focus of the study centered on the education perceptions and experiences of these Black male participants and their academic success and aspirations. The two major research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1: How do Black male students understand and articulate their educational experiences at Douglass Academy?

Research Question 2: How do they account for their success in matriculating from Douglass to their respective college campuses?

In particular, this project pays attention to how inside-of-school factors (such as teaching practices and adult–student interactions and relationships) affect students’ sense of belonging and schooling experiences.

Black Males and Urban Education

Research on Black males’ educational experiences in urban contexts reveals a complex interplay of individual behaviors and institutional forces. Researchers note that Black males challenge schools in many ways (Davis, 2003; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2014; Polite & Davis, 1999). Davis (2003) asserted that some of the major problems and challenges that Black boys create for schools are cultural and gender based. He contended that schools had difficulty dealing with “where these Black boys are coming from and their authentic experiences of being young, Black, and male in U.S. public schools” (p. 530). What is needed, according to Davis, is a solutions-oriented research agenda that includes a focus on the active role Black males play in creating their own school experiences and opportunities for achievement. He maintained that to always cast young Black males as victims “strips them of any agency in how they make meaning of who they are at school” (p. 530). This is especially true given the prevailing characterizations of urban “risk.” For instance, O’Connor, Mueller, and Neal (2014) proclaimed that urban residence “was presumed ‘risky’ in and of itself” in previous indices due primarily to experiences “that were more concentrated among urban populations (e.g., poverty, single-parent-households)” and “statistically correlated with negative life outcomes within and outside of school” (p. 76).

Not only do Black males challenge schools, but schools challenge this student population as well (Ferguson, 2000; Jordan & Cooper, 2003; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Noguera, 2014; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Extending Jordan and Cooper’s (2003) assertion, Black male students continue to be disproportionately at risk of school failure. Most pernicious, they contend, are the combination of institutional racism, intergenerational poverty, and the lack of meaningfully sustained educational reform and community development. They conclude by noting that “effective policies and strong interventions are needed to improve the plight of Black men in society,” which necessarily includes multiple institutions, such as schools, serving Black men (p. 211). In Ferguson’s (2000) ethnographic study, she found that Black adolescent males were punished and suspended in disproportionate numbers; in addition, the punishments and daily interactions with school staff sent powerful messages to Black male youth about their racial and gender identities. Similarly, Swanson and colleagues (2003) found that negative stereotyping and tracking from early

experiences influence Black male's achievements in school. In addition, Noguera (2003) argued that environmental and cultural factors influence the academic performance of Black males as well. Thus, Black males in urban contexts face myriad risk factors that threaten to impede their academic performance. As Polite and Davis (1999) contended, "To be an African American male in school and society places one at risk for a variety of negative consequences" (p. 1).

McGee's (2013) research on the experiences of 11 high-achieving Black male students attending urban schools is informative. McGee found that the students faced multiple forms of academic and physical threat within and beyond school walls; yet, these students exhibited strategic coping strategies that helped them negotiate a complex system of risk and ultimately exert their academic agency. These students resisted Black male stereotyping through their academic efforts, preppy dress, and gentle mannerisms and used culturally grounded behaviors to navigate challenging social situations in the school and neighborhood. Researchers also point to students' resilience as a key factor in their academic efforts as well (Bonner, 2014; Brooms, 2013; Graham & Anderson, 2008; O'Connor et al., 2014; Rhodes & Schechter, 2014). For instance, Rhodes and Schechter (2014) asserted that resilience can be fostered through relationships and education. In particular, they focused on youth engaged with an inner city community arts center program and found that cultural curricula and teacher-youth relationships can help mitigate the risk that youth are exposed to and bolster protective factors such as belonging and cultural pride. In addition, O'Connor and colleagues (2014) asserted the need for reanalyzing urban risk as a starting point for reconceptualizing student resilience. They identified multiple extant resources in urban environments, including families, schools, and peers that can assist students in their educational efforts. Thus, resilience is an important conceptual tool because it allows us to establish a more robust picture of how students engage schooling.

There is research that suggests that the performance of African Americans, more so than other students, is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement that they receive from teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Toldson, 2008). Duncan-Andrade (2009) maintained that adult-student relationships are critical not only while in high school but also in students' future after high school as well. Similarly, Toldson, Braithwaite, and Rentie (2009) found that having congenial relationships with teachers helps promote high achievement and academic aspirations for Black students. In their study of 118 students, Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2008) used quantitative measures to examine how factors from several life contexts—such as parent support, teachers, and peers—were related to the

school success of urban, African American youth. They found that parents and peers were most strongly correlated predictors of grades followed by teachers. Just as important as grades, these sources serve as important factors in school success and positive educational attitudes and behaviors. They concluded that the correlations between school and teacher support, and teacher relationships with students in particular, can have a positive association with academic success. Their study reaffirms the beneficence of social support and academic success and connects well with other factors such as students' educational intentions and aspirations. Lynn and colleagues (2010) investigated how a low-performing school in a low-performing school district copes with the persistent problem of Black male underachievement. Their findings reaffirmed the influence of teachers on the academic trajectories of students; in particular, they found a positive relationship between teachers' beliefs about their Black male students and their ability to be effective with them.

In addition, the achievement gap has been used to explain the academic performances of African American students. A number of scholars criticized this approach by revealing the inequities in resources and opportunities afforded to Black students (Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007; Noguera, 2003). These scholars offered more sophisticated critical interpretations of "the gap" that ultimately challenged the tacit assumption that achievement gap phenomenon is solely a matter of differences in the individual intellectual capacity of the compared groups. As an example, Diamond and colleagues (2007) argued that the "achievement gap" analysis needs reframing; instead of focusing solely on "achievement," more research is needed to examine the inequitable opportunities afforded to different student populations, which ultimately create an "opportunity gap." A range of researchers who highlight the challenges that Black male students face in their schooling experience support this argument. For instance, Toldson and Lewis (2012) urge us to challenge the status quo; they asserted the critical need for proactive strategies that prepare Black males to compete at a college or university that has demonstrated retaining and graduating this student population. Also, findings by Uwah and colleagues (2008) indicated that feeling encouraged to participate and educational aspirations were significant, positive predictors of academic self-efficacy for African American male students. Thus, researchers continue to acknowledge the significance of race in the academic success of African American youth (Bonner, 2014; Carter, 2005; Dixon-Román, 2012; Harper & Associates, 2014; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2014; Wright, 2011).

A range of scholars contends the need for addressing the narrative of Black males and education (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2014). Brown and Donnor (2011), for example, encouraged that we engage in

developing and deploying a “new narrative” on Black males, education, and public policy. Of note, they argued that the “Black male crisis thesis” too often leads to overemphasizing behavior modification as a strategy for collective improvement, which ultimately serves to deemphasize the historical and structural role of race as a life opportunity-shaping variable. The policy discourse and popular responses to this crisis narrative portray young Black males as (a) culturally and psychologically damaged and (b) suggest that existing structural organization of U.S. society is fair and equal. Brown and Donnor (2011) asserted that a new narrative “requires an examination of historically contingent narratives informed by the social epistemic forces of place and time” (p. 26). Similarly, Lewis and colleagues (2008) offered a typology of change in framing African American students’ success and failure. In revisiting national data and research literature on the ongoing urban Black–White achievement gap, the authors grounded their work in critical race theory and argued that the differences between the two groups are reflective of greater systemic problems. They offered the matrix of achievement paradigms, which encompassed three interrelated and competing paradigms: (a) social-structural, (b) deficit, and (c) discontinuity paradigm. These paradigms reveal the interrelated and competing impediments that are “actively and passively undermining widespread academic excellence among African Americans attending urban schools” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 148).

To contribute to the literature on Black males and urban schooling, I examine qualitative interview data from 20 Black male students who attended an urban, all-boys public charter secondary school. The interview data focused on the education perceptions and experiences of Black males, with particular attention on academic success and aspirations. The findings suggested that many of the Black males entered Douglass for a “new” learning experience though they still battled with their own self-conceptions, identity, and aspirations. Thus, some initially entered high school with a perspective that this was just the next step in schooling; however, many were unsure and even ambivalent about going to college. Along the way, from entry to high school graduation, they learned powerful lessons about themselves as Black males and enhanced their academic aspirations. These findings underscore the importance that school culture plays in connecting to students’ sense of self and academic performance, which ultimately encouraged them to strive toward success.

Theoretical Framework: Sense of Belonging

Educational research has illuminated myriad hypotheses to explain the lower academic performance of Black students generally, and specifically, Black

male students as compared with their school-aged peers. These hypotheses run the gamut of intrapersonal explanations, from “oppositional” culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) due to past discriminatory practices and experiences to framings that often diminish “Black” cultural capital (Carter, 2005; Dixon-Román, 2012). In addition, recent work focuses on the sense of belonging and connection between Black students and the school community to identify the impact that school culture and environment contribute to their academic performance and aspirations (Bonner, 2014; Booker, 2006; Brooms, 2014; Uwah et al., 2008). The current project relies on existing literature on school belonging as a key theoretical tool for unpacking the experiences of Black male students.

Sense of belonging is an essential component of the academic experience because it can play a significant role in students’ thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors (Uwah et al., 2008). Scholars have examined how sense of belonging, or mattering, affects learning and achievement (Booker, 2006; Goodenow, 1992; Osterman, 2000). Goodenow (1992), for instance, identified belonging as a dimension of support and asserted that it was a need that “must be met before higher motives (i.e., the desire for knowledge or aesthetic experience) can be activated” (p. 185). She defined psychological sense of belonging as the extent to which students perceive themselves to be included, valued, and respected members of the school community. Also, a psychological sense of school belonging can influence the educational adjustment of adolescent students and students at risk (Goodenow, 1992; Osterman, 2000). A sense of support from teachers (or other adults such as mentors, counselors, or coaches) contributes positively to school attendance, academic performance, sense of self, and educational aspirations (Brooms, 2013; Osterman, 2000).

Across multiple research studies, a strong sense of school belonging is associated with higher grades, academic motivation, and high school completion rates (Anderman, 2002; Goodenow, 1992; Osterman, 2000). For example, Anderman (2002) discovered that individual student reports of belongingness were positively related to grade point average (GPA) and self-concept and negatively related to school problems and absenteeism in a diverse sample of adolescents. Earlier research also revealed strong positive correlations as well. According to Osterman’s (2000) research, developing a sense of community in schools is critical to students’ experience of belongingness. In addition, she found that belongingness affects students’ academic attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and achievement.

Uwah and colleagues (2008) used a quantitative study to investigate the relationship between perceptions of school belonging, educational aspirations, and academic self-efficacy among 40 African American male ninth- and 10th-grade high school students. They found that feeling encouraged to

participate was a significant finding of the study that positively predicted academic self-efficacy. Of particular note, they asserted that

specific, direct, and authentic interactions with members of the school community who believe that they can perform at a high level appear to be more important to African American males than how much they perceive that they are liked by others. (p. 31)

Finally, Booker (2006) asserted that sociocultural perspectives on school belonging “underscore the importance of students’ relationships with others in the school setting and how these relationships impact achievement, self-concept, engagement, and classroom participation” (p. 4).

In summary, research on sense of belonging is correlated positively with students’ academic and schooling experiences. Feeling connected to the school community and having a sense of mattering are both critical for all students. Given the multiple ways in which they are challenged, especially in urban environments, a sense of school belonging may be particularly important for Black males and may help mitigate some of the risk factors they face. This belongingness is strengthened further by positive relationships and meaningful connections with others. Ultimately, as students feel more connected to the school and school community, they are able to establish a stronger sense of identity, gain acceptance and support among peers, display a positive orientation toward academic work and teachers, and demonstrate resilience.

Method

The research outlined here is part of a larger longitudinal case study on the educational experiences of Black male students across their secondary and postsecondary school experiences. In addition, the research focuses on how the students make sense of their personal and educational experiences. The study included semi-structured interviews with 20 young men, between 20 and 23 years of age, who were enrolled in college at the time of data collection, and all of whom graduated from Douglass Academy. In this study, I focus on the ways that the young men narrate their success in entering Douglass and eventually matriculating from high school to college.

Frederick Douglass Academy (pseudonym) is a college preparatory, ninth-through 12th-grade school located in an urban, low-income community. Designed as a single-sex charter school, Douglass Academy opened its doors in the mid-2000s and accepts any male student in the district. The single-sex design of Douglass Academy was based on contemporary research and

realities that revealed the low high school graduation completion for African American males, especially in high-need urban communities. In 2010-2011, its student body included approximately 550 students, all African American, and 75% of the students were eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. To date, Douglass Academy has maintained above a 90% graduation rate since it opened.

Participants

This qualitative study is based on interviews with 20, college-aged Black males who all graduated from Douglass Academy. During high school, all the residents lived in the same large urban city and nearly two thirds of the students ($n = 13$) self-identified as low-income (household income was less than US\$19,000). Purposeful and convenience sampling methods (Weiss, 1994) were used to recruit participants to this study. For the purposive method, the researcher conferred with the college counselor at Douglass to create a list of recent Douglass graduates who were enrolled in college in 2012. College enrollment was an inclusion criterion for any potential participant. From the initial list, I identified 45 students to invite to participate in the study. These 45 students attended colleges in locations that were convenient for the researcher to access. I informed students of the study via email communication. A total of 32 students expressed interest in participating in the study; given the availabilities and responsiveness, I secured participation from 20 students. All the participants included in this study were enrolled in college during the time of the interview. Pseudonyms are used as a way to protect the participants' confidentiality and identity.

Interview Data Collection

The current study is based on 20, in-depth interviews with Black male college-aged students. I used a phenomenological methodological approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), where I collected stories of the participants to better understand their path to college from their decisions to attend Douglass Academy to their plans beyond college. The primary source of evidence was two semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each participant. Participants were asked the same set of questions, but I took the liberty to probe relevant points of significance as they came up in the interview and conducted follow-up interviews with 13 of the students. The probing questions and follow-up interviews allowed me to clarify and contextualize the participant's responses to questions posed in the research protocol drafted for the study. I conducted member checks with the participants by soliciting

feedback about each of the major themes that developed during the study. Researchers contend that the utility of interviews is that they give us access to the observations and understanding of others (Weiss, 1994). Also, interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life and interior experiences and provide us a window on the past.

Procedures and Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, followed a semi-structured format, and were conducted at times and locations of the participants' choosing. On average, the total interviews for each participant lasted 5 hr 30 min. I conducted an analysis of the data using Weiss's (1994) four-phase approach. In the first phase, I read each transcribed interview, made initial notes, and established codes. I tested the keywords and codes against the research questions to ensure their applicability to this investigation. In the second phase, I sorted the data. Here, I created sections for each of the coded excerpts and then sorted them into larger categories. I reread the transcripts and in some cases, recoded into additional codes. In Phase 3, I organized the interview data for local integration. I summarized each of the excerpt files and their codes to bring coherence and meaning to the data. In the end, I renamed categories as themes, and I identified 18 themes from the interview data. The final step was inclusive integration. According to Weiss (1994), inclusive integration attempts to develop a single coherent story from the data. I performed a member check by sharing the themes with students to ensure they were accurate representations of their experiences and recollections. For the purposes of the current analysis, three major themes were selected to prepare this article, each of which had strong correlations with the others: (a) school culture, (b) relationships with teachers, and (c) succeeding at Douglass.

Researcher's Positionality

My previous role as a teacher, coach, and administrator at Douglass Academy allowed for a range of familiarity with the student participants, the neighborhood environment, and the school as well. In addition, as a Black male, I share their racial and gender identities—within a larger perspective. As a measure to scrutinize my familiarity, I shared my interview questions with four colleagues at different institutions who each provided me with important feedback. Although I had some familiarity with the students, I did not know how they made meaning from their own experiences. Thus, I straddle the fence in some ways as a researcher; although I am connected to their same

racialized and gendered group and although I worked at their school, I am still an outsider because of my age, achieved statuses, and experiences. Their sharing and narratives are ways in which they invite me into their space and into their world.

Findings

In the section that follows, I present a detailed discussion of each of the three themes along with narratives from the students and interweave research-based discussion to make meaning of their experiences. Throughout the findings, I use the students' own voices to illuminate their experiences, thoughts, and reflections. The goal of presenting the findings in this manner is to honor the students' experiences and lend authenticity to what the students offered individually and collectively.

School Culture: "They Instilled Pride in Us"

According to the students, they identified attending Frederick Douglass Academy as a critical experience in their lives. The major benefits were both academic and personal. Initially, many of the students expressed ambivalence in attending an all-boys school. Primarily, they were concerned about not having girls in their school—and what this would mean for their relationship prospects. Even more fundamentally, several of the students resisted because their parents or guardians were adamant about their attending Douglass. Here, the students felt their interests were not heard, and they had other schools that they were interested in much more. Even further, students also were not excited about the design of the school such as the extended school day and school uniforms. However, students' in-school experiences helped thrust them beyond their initial reservations as they became more familiar with the school and experienced some of the benefits that Douglass offered—such as school activities (both academic and non-academic) and relationship opportunities with staff and peers.

Jamal shared that "at first I didn't like it because I had to wear a shirt and tie everyday and we had to stay in school until 4:30. But, I met a lot of good people and it was a good experience." Although he expressed his dislike about the school uniform and school hours, the people he met and experiences he had helped balance Jamal's perception of the school. In elaborating on his school experience, he reflected,

Just the things that Douglass did. We had to say the Creed every morning even if we may have failed a test or you were feeling down. Just believe in yourself;

they instilled pride in us with “we believe.” I got to play basketball, track, [and] football for a year. I had good relationships with my friends, being able to talk to my teachers or coaches—they were always there no matter what. They always cared about you even when you got in trouble; they didn’t want to see you fail. I think that’s what made it a good experience.

In specifically identifying his positive experience at Douglass Academy, Jamal offered that the school culture was both inviting and uplifting. In addition, the school’s focus on helping students believe in themselves was a critical element for their sense of mattering and belonging. Believing was not simply something that was stated, but according to Jamal, students saw it, they embraced it, and it helped instill pride in students that they could achieve and overcome obstacles that they faced. The notion of believing in and supporting students was enhanced by the quality relationships that he had, which also were cultivated at the school. These relationships were affirming and contributed to the students’ sense of mattering. This school atmosphere helped launch students like Jamal into finding their way and self-actualization—not only at Douglass Academy, but also into their collegiate futures.

Shane framed his early perceptions a bit differently than Jamal, but still forecasted the same type of significance for his experiences. His schooling experiences were complicated by his relationship with his mother. Earlier in the interview, he shared that he and his mother disagreed a bit more as he got older. In fact, he recalled that he reacted combatively to his enrollment in Douglass Academy. Shane offered that he ended up attending Douglass Academy because his mother “made” him. His interest in two other schools was based primarily on playing football, and he expressed anger about his mother’s school decision. As he reflected on his high school experiences, he explained,

It was the worst time of my life, but a learning experience. Outside of trying to find something good out of the high school that I was going to and trying to keep me and my mother’s relationship afloat because of that . . . Douglass made it a learning experience. Basically seeing the different things that I could be introduced to that I had never seen before [and] just trying to understand how these things came to be and why I wasn’t introduced to them at an earlier age.

As Shane notes, attending Douglass was tough for him personally, but still it was a great learning experience. In comparing his experiences at Douglass with his previous schooling experiences, he remarked that “it was mind blowing. They introduced us to things that [city public] school students will never, unfortunately, experience.” Among the introductions that were critical,

according to Shane and many of his peers, were multiple visits to college campuses, internships, and extracurricular activities that allowed them to explore the city as well. For many students, Douglass provided an environment where the students and their futures mattered that was quite different from what they had experienced in previous school settings. These experiences enhanced the students' beliefs in themselves and instilled pride in them as well.

Shane's experiences are important especially because he was able to juxtapose his experiences at Douglass with attending another city public school during a portion of his freshman year. In addition, he entered high school focused primarily on playing football and shared that he did not give a lot of thought about his academic aspirations. He explained his experiences in the following ways:

I kind of say the last two years of my high school was the best. Outside of learning who I wanted to be and who I was and the transition between those two people. . . . Learning who I wanted to be, I wanted to be a student-athlete. I didn't want to be one of those [city] super stars that fell by the wayside because he couldn't keep his grades up. So, I wanted to keep the academic side up and on point as opposed to being at these larger universities trying to have me stay afloat and maybe bending some rules.

He added to his description of his high school experiences by noting,

[My high school experiences were] life changing. Life changing because outside of going to another Public League school, Benedict Arnold High, for a portion of my freshman year and seeing the difference between those two schools. [The differences were] teachers actually caring, books that didn't miss half of the pages that you needed to work on, teachers who actually came to work early and left late. Teachers who would put more into the life of a student than to tear down a student.

Shane perceived and experienced a stark contrast in the two schools he attended. At Arnold High, he noted teacher apprehension and dilapidated resources. Contrastingly, he was better able to appreciate the care and concern that his teachers at Douglass Academy displayed, and he also specifically identified their commitment to the students as well. These experiences were significant for Shane, much like his peers, because it allowed them to focus on self-actualization, develop their academic aspirations, and focus on their futures.

As students share about their high school careers, they identify a range of experiences that are significant to their tenure in high school. Although

several of the students were ambivalent about attending Douglass, because of the long hours or because they attended against their will, all the students in this study narrated their overall experiences in positive descriptors. The main thrust of the quality of their experiences was the school culture, which was highly supportive of the students and their efforts, and it also allowed students to develop their academic self-concepts. A key feature of the school culture that many of the students identify was highly positive student–teacher relationships. These relationships are discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Relationships With Teachers: “A Whole Lot of Tough Love”

The impact of student relationships with teachers is a significant finding across various research studies on student success (Brooms, 2013; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Toldson, 2008; Toldson et al., 2009). Across three national surveys, Toldson (2008) found that high-achieving Black male students reported that their teachers were interested in them as a person, encouraged them to be engaged, and provided them with positive feedback when they performed well. Thus, how teachers presented themselves as caring and respectful individuals was critical to how the students felt supported. Similarly, students in Graham and Anderson’s (2008) study explained that teachers helped to expand their social network. Specifically, they noted that teachers raised students’ expectations of themselves, challenged them academically, and provided them with support to achieve. In addition, Toldson and colleagues (2009) found that having compatible relationships with teachers helps promote high achievement and academic aspirations for Black students.

Having strong positive relationships with teachers provided students in this study with a level of support that helped bolster their academic performance. Darryl acknowledged,

My English class, this was my second year having this teacher, so I was pretty used to him. He was . . . he was one of the people that continued to push me and tell me that I could do more than what I was doing if I would push myself harder.

In elaborating on his experiences in his sophomore English class, Darryl responded,

I think, I had a good experience with him. I’m not sure, I don’t really remember how critically I thought in my English classes freshman year. But, I think this

class was more my speed; it had me thinking more critically. It had me thinking more critically about different issues that I had opinions about. For instance, one of the things that we had a conversation about was gay marriage. I thought it was like, "Really, we having a discussion about gay marriage?" My freshman year I know I was pretty homophobic. But, then I just learned that it was crazy to say that people couldn't get married because of their sexuality. I was also mindful of some of my classmates who might be gay and I had to think about the people who were around me. I felt more challenged.

Darryl's English teacher was Mr. Smith, a Black male in his late 30s who had more than 10 years of teaching experience. He was a founding teacher at Douglass Academy and coached the debate team; he also had taught at a different all-male private high school in the city. According to Darryl, Mr. Smith played a significant role in encouraging him academically and challenging his previously held views. Importantly, he felt that the class enhanced his critical thinking skills, and the teacher exposed him to a wide array of topics to consider not only as academic subjects but also how they mattered in his own life and the lives of those around him. In addition, he credited Mr. Smith with helping him grow as a person and as a student. He explained,

I think the [main] difference was I think I became a stronger writer and I began to enjoy writing a bit more. I guess because my teacher expected more out of me. If I messed up or didn't put much effort into an essay, he would call me out on it. He wouldn't put me on blast in the class, he would see me in the morning and he'd just ask me about it. He just expected more out of me and I just appreciate that he thought that I could write better . . . or at a higher level.

Darryl welcomed the heightened expectations of Mr. Smith and, in fact, sought out these same types of expectations from his other teachers as well. As the students increased their abilities and became even more focused on school, they increased their own expectations of their teachers. These mutual expectations increased the students' self-accountability—with their classmates and teachers alike. The relational component of Darryl's learning experience was clear in how his teacher provided him with critical feedback about his work and academic performance. Thus, the relationships that students developed with their teachers were critical to propelling them forward toward success. In reflecting on being pushed, Darryl responded,

I mean, it was good for me because it let me know that the teacher cared if he was willing to push me. I didn't have the best attendance, but he would tell me that I could do so much better if I was in class more often. And that was the year that I was missing class because of my [long commute to school]. So, him

saying that to me it was important because then I started to get up earlier so I could get there on time and I saw my performance raise. So, definitely, I saw that it wasn't just him talking; it wasn't him just trying to do his job. He actually told me those things because he believed in me.

Many of the students felt connected with their teachers and felt that their teachers wanted them to succeed. In multiple ways, they cited the teachers' belief in them individually and collectively as critical to them raising their own performances. The relationships that students had with teachers and the conversations that ensued through these—both inside and outside of classrooms—mattered in these students' experiences.

In describing his teachers from senior year, Fred explained,

It was a whole lot of tough love, especially towards me. I was getting a whole lot of tough love. I didn't do anything wrong, but I was just slacking. They took my prom away from me and they really shouldn't have. I was getting a lot of tough love because teachers thought I was going on the wrong track and they stayed on me. They didn't want to be too lenient and really wanted to drive the point home.

Fred saw his teachers, especially those his senior year, as wanting the best for him. They responded to his "slacking" by continuing to monitor his progress and constantly engaging him in conversations about his efforts and performances. He described these experiences as "tough love" that was necessary. Fred remarked,

It was necessary; it was very necessary. I didn't feel like I was straying on a path but I was going through some stuff my senior year. Sometimes just knowing that there's the love and it was tough was needed. In the midst of all of the toughness, they should love and they showed favor—not favoritism, but favor.

He explained the tough love in the following way:

Not letting up on me even though seeing that I'm hurt; still pushing me and not taking it easy and not taking it soft. Letting me know that it would be all right but not letting up on me. They didn't baby me.

As the students expressed, their teachers played a critical role in their maturation and academic success. Several of the students highlighted the importance of the relationships they had with their teachers and noted that these relationships helped to settle their academic concerns. In addition, they

learned strategies on how to increase their academic performance and even how to overcome some of the challenges that they faced. Kelly's reflection about his teachers provides a coherent summary about the important role they played for many of the students:

Overall, I would say they went the extra extent. When class was over with, they had a break, and they'd still assist you with whatever concerns you had at the time. They made sure you succeeded in your class. Some teachers made it challenging and some didn't, but they still made sure you got assisted. They didn't have office hours like college, but you could still send them email. And, they could also talk to you about stuff outside of school like what was going on at home. And they'd give you rides too. They spent a lot of time; they didn't just say, "I'll help you with this course and when the bell rang it was all over with." Even if you didn't have that class, they'd help you. They were very supportive. Because they were doing stuff that they wasn't even getting paid for, most of them at least.

According to Kelly, teachers at Douglass were invested in student success. This finding connects well with other research on Black male student success. For instance, Toldson (2008) found that high-achieving Black males believed that their teachers were "interested in them as a person, treated them fairly, encouraged them to express their views and gave extra help when needed" (p. 45). These types of behaviors by teachers are important because they are value-laden and student-centered. As the students noted in the current study, they found their teachers to be helpful, encouraging, and caring. The importance of school culture and relationships with teachers contributes to student schooling experiences and their successes as well, which is covered in the following section.

Succeeding at Douglass: "The Motivation That I Received From the School Overall"

As the students discussed their school experiences, they also reflected on what they believed helped them succeed at Douglass Academy. Allowing students to construct meanings from their schooling experiences is important because it provides a window to better understanding how they conceptualize their success and how they might imagine their future academic work as well. In addition, what students offer about their own experiences might help to inform how institutions can create learning environments and structure opportunities for student success (Bonner, 2014; Brooms, 2014; Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Wright, 2011). In reflecting on his success, Fred acknowledged,

I would say friends, family, and determination in that order. Because at a point I wasn't really messing with my family, at some point I had lost my determination and will to do my best—not just matriculate but do my best. And friends, I had a few friends that I was relying on—not to cheer me up but to get me through—who would get me back straight. A couple of guys who were setting me straight all the time and I needed that.

Many of the students in this study identified a range of reasons for succeeding in high school, including their friends, family, and desire to succeed. According to Fred, he was determined and motivated to succeed. His motivation was both internal (determination) and external (friends and family). He acknowledged that even when he was not as connected with his family and his determination was not at its highest, his peer relationships were a significant source of support for his efforts. Having a strong support group, among both peers and adults, helped students aspire to and stay focused on success.

Interestingly, many of the students did not credit themselves first for their academic success. When they spoke about themselves, they primarily identified their motivation, drive, or determination—but these were in conjunction with a support group. The participants desired to succeed in high school because they wanted to garner success in their future endeavors. Thus, they saw school success as an important part of the process for moving forward. Julius remarked,

When I look back at high school and even today still, it was certain people that were involved in my life that I *did not* want to let down. I really didn't want to let them down. I remember [my mentor] saying that I let him down once [and] I just wanted to jump off a bridge, I was like, "Jesus, take me now!" But, even beyond that, I had the brothers. We had each other's back and them dudes helped me to succeed in high school. And that just ties into my fear of failure.

In noting the people who helped shape him as a person, Julius identified several teachers and office staff along with the principals and assistant dean. In specifically discussing the role that adults played in helping him succeed, he added,

The main people, if I think about the people who played a key role in my success? There were two significant people; they were my mentor and Ms. Richardson [the business manager] . . . My mentor and Ms. Richardson were challenging me intellectually and as a person. Mr. Little [the dean] making me think critically all the time with these riddles; it mean something but it was always these riddles. Mr. Anton and Mr. Branch broke [math] down so that I could do better. Mr. Flagger [English teacher] challenging me, he was like, "You smart and you ain't that smart." And Ms. Grant [English teacher] told me,

“You might have some certificates and the school may have you doing some writing for them but you’re in my class now.”

Julius credited a range of adults for helping him excel at Douglass and strive toward success. These adults included his mentor along with key administrators and teachers. He asserted that these relationships were important because they not only supported him, but they were adults who also challenged him as well. In thinking about how he overcame some of his early obstacles and challenges, Julius shared,

My motivation through all of that was my fear of failure and letting down the people who had invested in me and I had invested in them. It was like, “Okay, so now what are you going to do?” I was looking for the next way to make it happen. Finding a way to get to where I need to get to . . . Just finding a way to persevere—even when you don’t want to. Finding a way to put somebody else ahead of you. When I get there, it was not so much of me; it was because of all the other people who had been in my life.

Overwhelmingly, the students identified others as key figures in their success. For instance, Winston expressed that “my peer group and the people . . . I would definitely have to say my peers . . . and, the motivation that I received from the school overall. And, the constant drill of college, college, college.” Students felt motivated to perform well academically and felt compelled to take responsibility for their actions. In addition, students developed an other-centered approach where they specifically tied their success to the interests and investments of others.

Todd and Shane also shared reflections about their success and learning at Douglass. Todd stated that his success was due to his teachers and the activities he was involved in; he remarked,

Just all the male figures and all the good advice I got. The clubs and teams I was a part of and just people believing. That was the main thing, just people believing that I could do all the things that I said I wanted to do. They actually wanted to see me achieve.

Shane also acknowledged how Douglass played a vital role in his success. He indicated the following about the school’s culture:

[The school culture] impacted my high school experience to actually make me want to strive to be a college graduate. Outside of that and without that, I know I would’ve fell between the lines of being a young hood and never making it out of the inner city.

Developing strong positive relationships with teachers helped many students excel academically. Similarly, they developed relationships with mentors that pushed them academically and in their personal lives. Damian noted,

My first two years [of high school] I was missing some guidance. At the end of my sophomore year, I got guidance from my mentor and stuff just took off from there. I started being a better student and a better person.

As noted by Todd, Shane, and Damien, they were able to “take off” after receiving strong support and guidance from their experiences in school. The young men acknowledged that teachers and mentors believed in them and helped them raise their level of performance. Julius acknowledged the importance of people investing in him and noted that they helped him “believe in myself even in times that I didn’t.” Todd echoed this remark and related that what helped him succeed was the belief that various school personnel poured into him accomplishing his own goals. Students not only received the support that was offered, but they also internalized it and were motivated as well. Because they were in a supportive environment and they had people who believed in them, the young men’s own self-confidence, effort, and performance all increased (Bonner, 2014; Brooms, 2014; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Fergus et al., 2014). For Damian, he conceptualized himself as a better student and person because of the guidance that he received. Even more critical for Shane, he believed his future was bright and attending Douglass helped enhance his future trajectory.

Discussion

The primary goal of this research study was to explore Black males’ educational experiences at Douglass Academy. The students entered Douglass from a variety of standpoints; for instance, some were ambivalent about the single-sex design of the school, some felt “forced” to attend because of their parents, and others entered simply trying to figure out what school was so they could stay afloat. Regardless of their entry points, the findings suggest that all the students valued educational attainment and the opportunities afforded to them (Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2014). More specifically, the participants identified belongingness, through school culture and relationships with teachers, as critical to their academic success.

Students in this study perceived that the school climate and environment harbored at Douglass were both inviting and uplifting. Students believed that Douglass focused on how they perceived themselves, which ultimately helped instill pride in students about their worth and their work. In addition,

they experienced a welcoming and supportive atmosphere that helped increase the students' beliefs in themselves and their self-efficacy. For instance, several students saw school engagement, and the experiences they had in activities, as a way of mattering. They constructed positive meanings from college campus visits, internships, and extracurricular activities. Thus, students interpreted their participation in a range of activities, both academic and non-academic, as a way of mattering and belonging in school. The activities enhanced students' sense of belonging because they not only could participate but also they had even more opportunities to develop bonds with teachers, coaches, and peers. This sense of connectedness mattered to the students because this bonding helped develop a "family like" atmosphere for them at Douglass. The students desired to be challenged academically, they wanted to be held accountable for their actions, and they wanted to be exposed to a range of future possibilities. Researchers continue to note the cultural capital that students bring with them into schools (Carter, 2005) and how these inform their desires to achieve (Howard, 2014). And, as a result, students in the current study increased their beliefs in themselves, and they also perceived that Douglass helped them learn who they could be and who they wanted to be.

The school culture at Douglass was reaffirmed through the students' relationships across the school. Strong, positive relationships with teachers were a critical element of how students conceived of their academic success. These relationships helped students think about their academic selves in more nuanced ways—that is, instead of only focusing on one facet of their identities (e.g., their athletic endeavors), students also learned the importance of their academic efforts. In addition, what teachers say to and about students matter—both personally and academically. What is said matters even more especially given the larger context of messages to and about young Black men. School staff thusly have unique daily opportunities to (re) affirm their student populations, which not only functions to bolster their esteem and sense of self but also is connected to student buy-in and interactions as well as academic and personal efforts. This finding connects well with previous research that identified teacher relationships as critical to student performance. For instance, in reviewing data across several national surveys, Toldson (2008) found that Black male students who were successful perceived their teachers to be respectful people who treated them like they matter. In addition, they thought of their teachers as nurturing people who helped build up their strengths. Most importantly, he asserted that belonging "might be an initial investment in the learning process for low-achieving black students that could ultimately foster an interest in school" (Toldson, 2008, p. 45).

Another key feature of student–teacher interactions is how teachers care for and care about students, which ultimately affects how they believe they belong in and to the school community. Students in this study provided an outline that highlighted five areas for what teacher caring looks like in schools: (a) building relationships with students; (b) assisting students with concerns—both personal and academic; (c) challenging students; (d) strong interpersonal communication, which allows for conversations and discussions about school-related and non-school-related issues and concerns (such as home life, romantic relationships, and future aspirations); and (e) spending time with students in structured and unstructured ways (such as attending their athletic contests and non-athletic extracurricular events). Students interpret these actions and behaviors, both individually and collectively, as ways of mattering. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), these are hallmarks of good teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy—where teachers create bonds with *all* the students, they encourage learning across the full range of student abilities, and fluid relationships extend beyond the classroom.

Contrary to an oppositional culture framework (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), which posits that Black students shun high-academic achievement and perceive school as White-centric, the Black male students in this study sought out, desired, and welcomed opportunities that would enhance their schooling experiences. They expressed appreciating academic challenges as opportunities for them to grow and develop as students. Also, because of their social networks and connections, they became increasingly more serious about school and wanted to honor the investments that people had made to them and their success. In addition to the school culture and relationships with teachers, the students overwhelmingly identified three key factors that contributed to their success at Douglass Academy: (a) their own motivation and determination; (b) the importance of peer and adult relationships—they identified their closest peer group members as “brothers,” noted the significance of male figures at the school, and discussed mentors and administrators as key to their positive schooling experiences; and (c) people believing in them. In each of these ways, students felt connected to the school and valued and respected within the school community.

The correlation between Douglass’s school culture, in-school relationships, and efforts for success specifically translated into increased desires to attend and graduate from college. The findings presented in this study connect well with other researchers who clearly identify the value and importance that Black males place on education (Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2014). In fact, Howard (2014) proclaimed that college plays an important role in Black males’ academic identity. Paying closer attention to how Black males perceive themselves academically may help inform us of opportunities to broaden their perspectives and enhance various characteristics for academic success—such as motivation and resilience.

Moving Forward: Considerations on Black Males and School Success

To many of the students in this study, succeeding in high school was other-centered, they saw their efforts connected to the efforts of their peers and teachers, and they believed in the benefits that their success could convey—about themselves, their communities, and their families. Accordingly, students noted that the school culture and relationships they developed with teachers helped motivate them toward success (Bonner, 2014; Brooms, 2013; Fergus et al., 2014; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2014). What schools project to students and how students receive these projections—about who they are and what they are capable of accomplishing—has academic, personal, and social ramifications. As students reflected on their experiences and the meaning of those experiences, they identified college aspirations as a new possibility. The students had transitioned from “just trying to make it” in high school to having serious desires for college and their future. These reflections and offerings explicitly affirm how schools can enhance students’ self-conceptions, academic aspirations, and future possibilities. In feeling connected within the school community, not only did the students express feeling supported in their academic efforts, but they also held positive perceptions of their academic ability and trajectory.

The findings from this study have important implications for parents, families, schools, and other education stakeholders, as we consider the importance of improving student performance especially in urban areas. This information can be used to structure learning environments, advocacy workshops, or other school- or community-based efforts to improve the academic success of Black males. The students in this study emphasized that the school culture and their sense of belonging played vital roles in making them feel valued and appreciated and provided them with critical opportunities to (re)map their pathways to success. Second, the multiple levels of support that the students received from their teachers, staff, and peer group helped put them and keep them on a pathway to complete high school and ultimately enroll in college. The impact of these relationships highlights the critical roles that these individuals and groups play for African American young men (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noguera, 2014; Woodland, 2008; Wright, 2011). Goodenow (1992) used “psychological sense of school belonging” to illuminate the influence of students’ perceptions of feeling valued and respected within the school community. A sense of support from encouraging adult members in the school has high positive correlations with student performance, attendance, and educational aspirations (Brooms, 2013, 2014; Goodenow, 1992; Osterman, 2000; Toldson, 2008). In addition, Fergus and colleagues (2014) maintained that positive interactions with teachers, administrators, and peers,

paired with strong sources of encouragement increases the student's sense of belonging to the school community and enhance their personal and academic resilience. Even more importantly, they posit that for young men of color to negotiate the structural and cultural obstacles that they encounter successfully, schools must create environments that are designed deliberately to protect them and promote resilience. Thus, as noted by students in the current study, the schooling environment is a significant source of bolstering students' self-identity, academic performance, and non-cognitive skills as well—such as resilience, persistence, and determination.

The student narratives about teachers reveal the importance of relationships in their sense of belonging and academic aspirations. This tenet connects well with a central principal of Milner's (2007) work as he maintained that teachers must care *and* demonstrate their care toward students. He acknowledged that teachers must go beyond saying that they care by demonstrating it in what they actually do. As noted by the students in this study, they believed that their teachers cared for them *precisely because* they demonstrated care personally, academically, and socially. As the students reflected on their schooling experiences, they shared a variety of ways that their teachers cared. Academically, teachers cared by challenging them in both the quality of their work and their academic engagement. In addition, teachers showed just as much care personally by engaging with students about their home lives and personal relationships. In these ways, teachers functioned much like life coaches.

As we work to enhance the experiences of Black male students, we must establish learning environments that are inclusive communities where they feel connected and that they belong; also, these environments must positively support their efforts, allow for healthy relationships across peers and adults alike, and position them to see, believe, and achieve success. School culture is a critical component to harboring strong, positive academic identities and goals for our young Black men; we need to understand that high-academic standards are attainable with significant support from positive relationships and healthy academic and social environments (Fergus et al., 2014; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2014; Toldson, 2008). Findings from this research reaffirm the benefits of centering the lives, experiences, and meanings that young Black males offer to us and how we might help them garner success by building on their strengths, assets, and talents.

Author's Note

Derrick R. Brooms is now affiliated with University of Cincinnati.

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Author Biography

Derrick R. Brooms is a faculty in sociology and Africana Studies at the University of Cincinnati and serves as a youth worker as well. His research and activism focuses on educational equity, race and racism, diversity and inequality, and identity. He is the author of *Being Black, Being Male on Campus: Understanding and Confronting Black Male Collegiate Experiences* (SUNY, 2017) and, along with Jelisa Clark and Matthew Smith, he is co-author of *Empowering Men of Color on Campus: Building Student Community in Higher Education* (Rutgers, 2018).