Chapter 74
Empowering African American Adolescent Males through Engaging Literacy Tasks

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ABSTRACT

African American adolescent males continue to attain the lowest literacy achievement among racial/ ethnic groups. It is imperative that schools attend to the instructional needs of African American adolescent males to close the achievement gap in literacy. Educators must strive to infuse the interests and experiences of African American adolescent males in literacy instruction. The chapter features research about African American adolescent males' perceptions of their engagement with literacy tasks. Despite perceived stereotypes, many African American adolescent males exemplify resilience as they navigate societal obstacles to achieve academic success. African American adolescent males are readers who possess great potential. Literacy gives them control of their lives. Educators play an integral role in mediating engagement with literacy tasks. The author discusses how to best support African American adolescent males with literacy instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 15% of African American eighth-grade students achieved proficient levels in reading—the lowest scores for a racial/ethnic group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). The percentage is even lower for African American eighth-grade males who achieved 10% proficient levels in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). Hilliard (2003) posited that no real achievement gap exists among racial/ethnic groups as there is not a valid instrument to measure such an achievement gap. Instead, this achievement gap should be referred to as the gap between the current performance of African American adolescent males and the standard of excellence. This standard of excellence should be commensurate with college readiness.

Unfortunately, African American adolescent males are underrepresented on college campuses (Tatum, 2003). The graduation rates of African

American adolescent males are dismal (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). The rate at which African American adolescent males enter prison far exceeds their graduation rates (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). They are not offered similar opportunities to enroll in advanced classes such as advanced placement and gifted (Noguera, 2003, 2008; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012; Tatum, 2005). In fact, African American adolescent males are more likely to be enrolled in exceptional education classes (Delpit, 1992; Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Ogbu, 1995; Polite & Davis, 1999; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012; Tatum, 2003, 2005). African American adolescent males experience ambivalent treatment as they are both adored and disliked at school (Davis, 2003). In spite of these obstacles, many African American adolescent males navigate the system with some success (Noguera, 2003, 2008; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). Yet, these challenges continue to persist in schools with limited attention given to improving African American adolescent males' school experiences. In order for African American adolescent males to view schools as being supportive of their identities and dreams, schools need to change their cultures and structures (Noguera, 2008). One of the ways this change occurs is through literacy instruction that addresses African American adolescent males' issues and concerns—it must be of value to them. This chapter reveals how educators may support and empower African American adolescent males through engaging literacy tasks.

BACKGROUND

Literacy engagement has been defined in numerous ways (Alvermann, 2002; Au, 1997; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Cambourne, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990a, 1990b; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 1996, 2004; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Landis, 2002; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Many researchers believe that literacy engagement cannot occur without social interaction, cognitive awareness, conceptual knowledge, and motivation (Alvermann, 2002; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 1996, 2004; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). In fact, most of the descriptions of an engaged reader encompass social interaction, use of strategies, prior knowledge, and motivation.

Oldfather and Dahl (1994) posited that engagement occurs when students are intrinsically motivated to participate in literacy tasks. The engaged reader enjoys talking with others about books (Guthrie, 2004; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994). An engaged reader is actively involved in reading and uses strategies and prior knowledge to construct meaning. Baer (2003) explained that engaged readers are motivated to read for information and pleasure. Students who engage in literacy tasks outside of the classroom without teachers' coercion are truly engaged (Au, 1997). Cambourne (1995) asserted that engagement occurs when students are confident that they can perform teachers' text demonstrations and believe their involvement with texts will advance their achievement. Engaged readers are not afraid to take risks with texts. They have a purpose for learning and actively participate in that learning. Readers engage in reading texts because they are motivated to read those texts (Au, 1997; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Cambourne, 1995; Guthrie, 1996, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994).

Furthermore, engaged readers attain higher levels of reading achievement (Au, 1997; Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Literacy engagement overcomes barriers to achievement such as gender, parental education, and socioeconomic status (Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2001). Even though females typically outperform males in overall literacy achievement, males who

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