

We're Graduating, What's Next? Relational Contribution to the Educational Attainment of Black Bermudian Adolescent Boys

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Abstract

Guided by ecological and integrative theories of child development, this article examined the associations between multiple systems of influence (school and family) and the educational aspirations of Black Bermudian adolescent boys. This study used qualitative data gleaned from semistructured interviews with students in their senior year at a Bermudian public high school ($N = 18$, $M_{\text{age}} = 18$). Findings revealed that family members and teachers encouraged boys to stay committed to school, thereby supporting high school graduation, academic confidence, and educational aspirations for higher education. However, boys had not learned enough about the complicated process of college and fellowship applications to execute their educational goals, leaving them to wonder “what’s next?” This study contributes to our cross-cultural and nuanced understanding of the important role that families and teachers play in the educational lives of Black male adolescents

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and suggests that interventions targeting families and teachers might promote the educational attainment, and consequent earnings, of Black male students.

Keywords

adolescent development, educational attainment, school relationships, family relationships, Black boys

The marginalization of young men of African descent has been documented in several countries throughout the African Diaspora, including Britain, Canada, Jamaica, and the United States (Bastick, 2001; Figueroa, 2004; Miller, 1991; Mincy, 2006; National Visible Minority Council on Labour Force Development, 2004; Noguera, 2009; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). In the United States, African American men have the lowest educational attainment of any ethnic group and among both genders (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010) and are more likely to devalue academic success than Black women (Cokley & Moore, 2007). Analysis of Census data by the authors reveals that young Black Bermudian men have also fallen behind their same age peers in their educational attainment and consequent earnings. In spite of Bermuda's relatively strong economy, Black men have not been able to find their fair share of this economic opportunity and are less likely to graduate high school or go to college (Department of Statistics, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2009).

There are many similarities in the education, earnings, and crime statistics of Black adolescents and young men in Bermuda and the United States. Therefore, we consider the rich academic literature in the United States on Black adolescents to provide a viable framework for this study. For example, in the United States, positive relationships at home and at school have been found to protect Black male adolescents from various risks, including socio-economic disadvantage, and to promote educational attainment and career success (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara Barry, & Haskins, 2010; Noguera, 2009; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). However, few have qualitatively explored the qualities of these relationships that contribute to the educational attainment of young Black men, especially in contexts outside of the United States. This study begins to fill that gap by examining the educational aspirations of Black Bermudian youth and how their relationships at home and at school contribute to those aspirations.

The Bermudian Context

In Bermuda, recovery from the worldwide recession of the 1980s was accompanied by a shift in the industrial composition of employment from tourism-related industries (hospitality and transportation) to the international business sector (financial and insurance companies) and business services (Newman, 1994). This shift in the industrial composition of employment favors workers with postsecondary education, but the educational attainment, and earnings, of young Black Bermudian men lags behind that of their same age peers (Department of Statistics, 2002, 2006).

A review of the 2000 Census of Population and Housing by the authors revealed that the proportion of young White men who obtained high school diplomas (26%) was more than twice the proportion of young Black Bermudian men who did so (10%). What is more, the proportion of Black men with a BA degree or more (9%) was smaller than the corresponding proportion of Black Bermudian women (16%) or White Bermudian men (18%; Department of Statistics, 2002; Mincy, Jethwani-Keyser, & Haldane, 2009).

More recent statistical data suggests that Black Bermudian men continue to fall behind women and White men in their educational attainment. Enrollment data collected from Bermuda's Ministry of Education (2009) reveals that Black Bermudian female students were more likely to graduate high school and attend Bermuda College. In 2008, almost half of the Black Bermudian male students left the public high schools before completion, compared with less than one third of the Black Bermudian female students. In 2009, Bermuda College had 146 graduates, 72.6% of them were young women. From 2004 to 2009, Bermuda College graduated 225 men and 522 women (Bermuda Ministry of Education, 2009).

The Department of Statistics in Bermuda (2006) conducted an Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. Among other things, this survey revealed that the scores of Black Bermudian men on all domains used to measure literacy and numeracy fell below minimal standards. Among 16- to 30-year-olds, Black men represented 34% of young people who did not meet minimal skills standards, while young Black women represented 26% of young people who did not meet these standards. White men and women represented 15% and 18% of those who did not meet these standards, respectively. These results indicate that Black Bermudian men are less eligible for jobs requiring high literacy skills.

Limited educational attainment also appears to restrict Black Bermudian men to unemployment or jobs in low-paying industries. A review of the

2000 Census of Population and Housing by the authors revealed that the number of White Bermudian men who worked in the two highest paying industries, international corporations and business services, was three times the proportion of Black Bermudian men who did so. Young Black Bermudian women were two times more likely to be employed in international business than their male counterparts. However, the proportion of young Black men who worked in the hotel industry, the lowest paying industry identified in the Census, was twice the proportion of young White Bermudian men who did so. Furthermore, Black Bermudian men are twice as likely as White Bermudian men to be unemployed (Department of Statistics, 2002; Mincy, Jethwani-Keyser, & Haldane, 2009).

Given the long history of colonialism and racial inequality in Bermuda, it is likely that racism, particularly institutional racism, plays a large role in the marginalization of young Black Bermudian men and in racial segregation and inequality (Clark et al., 1978; Hodgson, 1997). For decades, Black Bermudians were relegated to the lowest positions on the occupational ladder, including those in domestic work and hotels, and to segregated schools that prepared Black students for manual labor and where they were exposed to fewer scholarships, guidance counselors, and resources (Hodgson, 1997, 2008). Furthermore, Quinlan (2006) finds support for a gender bias in parental investments in education in Caribbean societies and postulates that when parents are aware that their sons will be marginalized, they are correct in predicting that investments in their daughters will be more (financially) rewarding, leaving them more likely to support the education of their daughters. A single mother is especially likely to invest parental time and other resources when she senses that her daughter will provide a greater return on the investment in terms of contributions to the household (Quinlan, 2006). Although Bermudian culture differs from the (various) Caribbean culture(s), Bermuda shares with these Islands many Black men who are marginalized, enrolled in racially segregated schools, and who are raised in female-headed households.

There are also many parallels between the status of young Black men in the United States and in Bermuda. Black men in both countries have low rates of secondary school completion. Only half of Black adolescents in Bermuda graduate from the public high schools; only 47% of Black males graduate from high school in the United States. Despite rising rates of return, college enrolment rates for Black male students are lower than any other demographic group in Bermuda. The same is true of college enrolment and completion rates in the United States (Sen, 2006). Furthermore, Black men without high school diplomas are overrepresented among those who commit

crimes and are therefore overrepresented among the prison population in the United States (Western, 2002). In Bermuda, Black Bermudian men are highly overrepresented among the incarcerated population and they are much more likely than their peers to commit drug-related offenses and violent crimes (Bermuda Police Service, 2005).

In Bermuda, Black men are not pursuing higher education at the same rates as their same age peers and are consequently underrepresented in high-paying industries. However, there has been no empirical research examining the marginalization of Black Bermudian adolescents. In the United States, family support and positive school relationships have been found to protect Black boys from various risks, including socioeconomic disadvantage, and positively influence educational and career decisions and outcomes (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Nichols et al., 2010; Noguera, 2009; Resnick et al., 1997; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Considering the parallels in the educational attainment of Black men in the United States and in Bermuda, we explore the hypotheses that emerge from the rich U.S. literature to gain some insight into these potential protective factors for Black Bermudian adolescents in school. The next two sections review the U.S. literature.

Associations Between Family Relationships and Educational Attainment

In the United States, few would deny the critical role that family support plays in adolescent development, regardless of race. Family support has been found to be particularly effective in promoting academic achievement and positive expectations for the future among Black boys and serves to prevent them from dropping out of high school (Dubow et al., 2001; Jackson & Meara, 1977; Mander, 2006; Nichols et al., 2010; Roderick, 2003; Rumberger et al., 1990). When parents and extended family are actively involved in the education of their children, an invaluable bridge is established between their lives at school and at home (Mander, 2006). Day-to-day family discussions about school in a supportive and encouraging context sends the message that education is a top priority, that expectations for academic achievement and educational attainment are high, and that they do indeed believe their Black sons can succeed in school (Roderick, 2003).

For example, Rumberger et al. (1990) revealed that inner-city high school students are less likely to drop out of school when their parents help them make decisions about proper behavior and are actively involved in their educational lives. Educationally engaged families monitor and help with homework, attend school conferences and functions, and provide a supportive learning

environment at home. These engaged families are likely to help adolescents make sense of their educational experiences and inform their decisions both in school and about the future. Black boys who receive this educational support from their families are more likely to achieve academic achievement and higher educational attainment.

In a review of the literature on family functioning and African American boys' academic achievement, Mander (2006) found that active involvement in the monitoring of homework increases the odds of school success, especially when teachers perceive the parents as being actively involved. A recent study by Nichols et al. (2010) identified some specific qualities of the family system that are associated with the educational aspirations of African American adolescents. In this study of 130 socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged urban African American adolescents (mean age = 16.76), the authors found that perceived parental educational involvement and parental educational expectations were significant predictors of educational aspirations.

Associations Between School Relationships and Educational Attainment

Black male students are more likely than any other group in the United States to be punished, labeled, and categorized for special education and to experience academic failure (Noguera, 2009; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). However, when they experience encouraging and supportive teachers who have high expectations for their students, these negative outcomes can be averted. In the United States, positive teacher-student relationships have been identified as important dimensions of school experience that contribute to academic achievement and educational attainment among Black male students (Booker, 2006; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Noguera, 2009). For those who have experienced adversity as children, a relationship with a caring adult can protect them from poor academic performance and school engagement, substance abuse, behavioral problems, and promote psychological well-being and prosocial coping strategies (Allen, Almeida, & Steinberg, 2004; Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). Perceptions of teacher support and encouragement have been found to help young Black male students to achieve graduation, higher school engagement, high educational aspirations, and positive expectations for the future (Jackson & Meara, 1977; Roderick, 2003).

According to Croninger and Lee (2001), Black high school student's beliefs about how much their teachers encourage and support their efforts to

succeed in school can reduce the likelihood that they drop out of high school by nearly half. Furthermore, “Students who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and who have had academic difficulties in the past find guidance and assistance from teachers especially helpful” (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 548). Students who experience positive relationships with their teachers might access a multitude of resources including, but not limited to, encouragement to stay in school, information and guidance about professional or academic decisions, and assistance with schoolwork, making these relationships critical protective factors for adolescent development (Resnick et al., 1997; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Black male students who access these resources are less likely to drop out of school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Fine, 1991). However, when students perceive their teachers as not available to help them with schoolwork or as not interested in how well they do in school, they are more likely to experience poor academic outcomes (Fine, 1991). For example, Fine (1991) found that the likelihood that urban students drop out of school was decreased when students perceived their teachers to be supportive and encouraging of academic success. Although boys in Bermuda are dropping out of high school at alarming rates (Bermuda Ministry of Education, 2009), little is known about how relationships with their families and teachers might encourage greater educational attainment or the characteristics of these relationships that can lead to positive educational outcomes.

In sum, the U.S. literature shows that relationships at home and school that are perceived as supportive and encouraging of educational goals help students through the process of learning, thereby protecting students from the academic risks associated with demographic and racial disadvantages (Booker, 2006; Croninger & Lee, 2001). However, what is less understood in both the United States and elsewhere is how environmental forces influence the way in which Black male adolescents come to perceive schooling and how those perceptions influence their educational goals. The ways in which interpersonal relationships qualitatively affect the educational attainment of Black men is likely to vary across contexts and cultures (Arnett, 2008). Black Bermudian men lag behind Black Bermudian women and White Bermudian men in both educational attainment and earnings. Understanding how they make meaning of their educational aspirations is particularly important because of the negative outcomes associated with limited schooling, including involvement with the juvenile justice system, drug and alcohol use, poor mental health, and poor relationship quality (Brown, Moore, & Bzostek, 2004). Indeed, Bermudian men are filling prisons and jails at alarming rates (Bermuda Police Service, 2005; Regan, 2003).

Using qualitative interviews with Black Bermudian boys who were near high school completion, this study explores their educational and career aspirations, how their relationships at home and in school helped them achieve high school graduation, and how these relationships are influencing their goals for the future.

Theoretical Framework

Human ecology theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) identifies the social environment as a primary context for development and explains that the individual develops not only within his or her immediate interpersonal relationships but also within the various environmental settings to which he or she is exposed. Various contexts of development are like circles within circles, with the individual being at the center. The outermost circle is the macrosystem, which holds the dominant values and beliefs of the culture in which the individual lives and carries an ideology that endows meaning and motivation to particular roles and activities (i.e., racial and gender beliefs). The next level inward, the exosystem, includes the socioeconomic context of the society in which the individual lives (i.e., lower earnings and educational attainment for Black men). The next level inward, the mesosystem, represents the interactions among major settings in the microsystem of the developing person (i.e., family, peer group, workplace, neighborhoods, and schools). Human ecology theory suggests that families and schools are critical contexts for development as they prepare adolescents for adulthood and influence their decisions, including the amount of education they receive (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Croninger & Lee, 2001). This theory allows for an understanding of human development that goes beyond behavioral observation and considers how aspects of the environment and the larger social contexts inform individual development throughout the life span. This study aims to understand the experiences of Black Bermudian male adolescents within the meso and microsystems of their school and family environments and the interactions between them. In particular, this study examines how the messages they receive in this system contribute to their career and educational aspirations.

The integrative theory for the study of development in minority populations (Coll et al., 1996) extends human ecology theory by emphasizing the processes that lead to variation within minority populations. Rather than examining developmental deviations in comparison with White middle-class populations, this theory encourages studies that examine normative developmental processes and outcomes among minority children. This theory takes the stance that differences in physical, intellectual, and psychological capacities

are not innate or due to a genetic or cultural deficiency. Instead, elements in the environment (poverty, social relationships, racial and gender beliefs) inform variations in development, including one's social mobility and range of available options, including their educational attainment. Given the long history of racial inequality in Bermuda, it is likely that racism, particularly institutional racism, plays a large role in the marginalization of young Black Bermudian men (Clark et al., 1978; Hodgson, 1997, 2008). This study of Black Bermudian adolescents aims to understand the social world from their perspective and lived experience, while considering how elements of the environment interact with and shape their perceptions.

Together, these theories are used to consider how the interpersonal context explains variations in development—in this case, how educational and cultural messages interact with experiences at home and in school, to inform their educational goals. An understanding of some of the common experiences of Black Bermudian high school students will identify some of the characteristics of the mesosystem that are most critical for promoting their educational attainment and eventual earnings.

Method

Research Design

An interpretive qualitative design was selected to examine the professional and educational aspirations of Black male high school students. This approach aims to “understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 221) and provides a means for marginalized individuals to candidly share and make meaning of the ways in which the messages they receive inform their goals and aspirations (Morrow, Raksha, & Castaneda, 2001). A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to examine how the identified themes and patterns in the interviews contribute to and enhance our existing understanding of the educational aspirations of Black adolescents in the research literature.

Participants

Participants were 18 Black adolescents, 17 through 19 years of age (mean age = 18.0), in their senior year at one of the two public high schools in Bermuda. The selected school serves approximately 650 students in Grades 9 through 12 and over 90% of the entire student body is Black Bermudian. The leaders of the school were women, and so were most of the teachers. The

majority of the study participants reported living in single-parent households with their mothers (72.2%). Thirty-nine percent live only with their mothers and 33% live with their mothers and a grandparent or stepfather. Seventeen percent of the participants live with both their mothers and their fathers and 11% live with their fathers and a grandparent or stepmother.

Students reported that their mothers were more likely to go further in school and to work in the financial sector than their fathers. Twenty-eight percent of the mothers in our sample achieved an associate's degree or more and another 16.7% attended some college classes. None of the students reported that their fathers received a college degree, although 33.3% reported that their fathers attended some college classes. More mothers, as compared to fathers, worked in banks or as accountants (33.3% vs. 5.6%) and in the health or education industries (22.2% vs. 0%), whereas more fathers were involved in the trade occupations such as construction (38.9% vs. 0%). These gender differences in educational and employment outcomes are consistent with those of the greater Black Bermudian population (Mincy, Jethwani-Keyser, & Haldane, 2009).

Procedures

This study aimed to recruit Black adolescent boys who would be able to identify their plans after high school and reflect on how their relationships at home and in school have contributed to their post-high school educational aspirations. Consequently, all the Black male students in their final year of high school ($n = 52$) were invited to participate. Using a recruitment script that asked students to volunteer for a study that would explore their educational and professional goals, the authors of this study presented the study to all eligible 52 boys in their senior year, both in an assembly-style format in the auditorium and in their individual classes. Of the 52 boys who were eligible for the project, 18 volunteered to participate (35%). These 18 students returned assent forms and those below 18 years of age also returned a signed consent from a parent or legal guardian. All 18 of these interviews were included in the present analysis and offered enough data to reach "saturation," a point where consistent themes and reliable conclusions can be made (Bowen, 2008).

Interviews took as long as was necessary, usually 45 minutes to 1 hour, to build rapport with participants and to unpack their perceptions of the complex relations between social support and educational aspirations. Interviews took place in a predetermined private location at the school to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were conducted during student's free periods or

elective classes, with the teacher's permission, and each student was given a pen and a highlighter to thank them for their time and participation. The study was approved by the institutional review board at the authors' host institution.

Interviews. Each student participated in a one-to-one semistructured interview that explored students' educational goals, their specific plans for next year, and the messages that they received at home and in school regarding these plans. Following a written protocol, the interviews were divided into four sections. The first section explored the educational and professional aspirations of the students. The interview started with a broad question about what the student planned to do after high school. This question proved to be a very useful and nonthreatening way to get the interview moving smoothly. The second section of the interview focused on the school experience, including how they would describe the school, their likes and dislikes, and the nature of their relationships with their friends and teachers and the advice their friends and teachers give them about their plans for their futures; the third section explored their family relationships and the types of things they talk to their mothers, their fathers, and their extended family about, including the advice they get from each of these family members. The interview concluded with more detailed questions about their aspirations for the future including anticipated obstacles, such as racism, in the transition to work and postsecondary education. Throughout the interview, participants were asked to offer examples from their lived experiences that informed their opinions and goals.

Because the same interviewer conducted all the interviews, responses informed the interview protocol throughout the data collection process. For example, when it became apparent that many of the boys were living with their grandparents, questions were added about the role that their grandparents play in their lives and the advice that they get from grandparents regarding their educational and professional goals.

Researcher as instrument. Each interview was conducted and audio-taped by the first author and principal investigator, an American, mixed race woman (Indian and White) in her late 30s. This researcher is a developmental psychologist who has conducted a great deal of qualitative work, both in the United States and internationally, with marginalized adolescents. She reflected on her own cultural experience and how it may have influenced her interpretation, both in the interviews themselves and in the data analysis, and tried not to make assumptions about similarity, or dissimilarity, of experiences. Instead, she, and the entire research team, stayed open to the lived experiences of the participants. Analytic memos (Maxwell, 2005) were

maintained by all team members involved in interviewing and/or analyses. These memos were both self-reflective and process-oriented and included initial and ongoing reflections, questions, ideas, and analytic decisions.

Data analysis. All the interview audiotapes were transcribed and coded, resulting in more than 400 pages of data. In line with the interpretive approach, data analysis relied on the qualitative methodology of open coding—a strategy that divided the data into discrete units of analysis reflective of the major themes that were embedded in the words of study participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, the authors read through the interviews with the aim of summarizing the stories being told by the adolescents. The purpose of these “narrative summaries” was to condense the interview materials into shorter narratives that captured the essence of the stories being told by the adolescents (Miller, 1991). The authors of the study then developed a coding scheme that focused on participant’s aspirations and their relationships at home and in school. In addition, some codes emerged from the data itself, including the specific types of advice (e.g., “stick with it”) they were getting from the various individuals in their lives. With the assistance of a research assistant, an African American man who recently attained his master’s degree in social work, verbatim transcripts of the interviews were then reread multiple times and coded with Atlas ti software to identify where, when, and how the themes were revealed in the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Overlapping themes and patterns that identified student aspirations and the messages they received at home and in school were identified across transcripts by the authors. Networks were created to summarize, consolidate, and organize the central themes that were described by at least 30% of the participants. Themes are presented in this article with illustrative quotes drawn from the interview texts, staying true to the language of both the participants and the interviewer. To protect confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms.

The interpretive approach is based on the notion that truth is subjective and co-constructed by the specific social interactions within any research study (Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, because boys’ perspectives can change over time and in different settings, notions of traditional reliability and validity do not apply to this qualitative study. Nevertheless, steps were taken to reduce the possibility of researcher bias and to maximize the trustworthiness and credibility of our findings (Morrow, 2005).

In addition to the analytic memos maintained by all team members, the team conducted coding checks for adequate agreement, reviewed all coding matrices to discuss competing hypotheses or rival conclusions and finding implications (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Areas of potential bias or uncertainty were brought to the attention of the team. For example, peer influence and

racial inequality were not significant themes in the data as they relate to students' educational and professional goals. Team discussions considered the reality that these boys have only experienced "Black" Bermuda because most White Bermudians attend private schools so perhaps these boys are not able to anticipate the racial obstacles they may experience after graduation. And because so many of their peers have dropped out of high school, perhaps boys do not view their peers as educationally influential as their teachers and their families. However, for brevity and focus in this article, we chose to focus on the two variables that did emerge from the data as making a significant difference in boys' ability to promote graduation, continue their education, and resist the temptation to drop out: teachers and parents.

Several advisors in Bermuda from the education, not-for-profit, and business communities were solicited to provide interpretive feedback on our analytic strategies and findings and they also helped to address possible sources of interpretive bias. For example, many advisors offered the interpretation that with so few fathers in the home and with so few Black Bermudian men in higher earning industries, boys are more likely to drop out because they do not think an investment in education would be worth their while. Advisors agreed with our recommendations that Black Bermudian boys need more exposure to a variety of job opportunities and guidance regarding their applications for higher education. Through the following steps—documentation of methodology, coding checks, and critical evaluation by other researchers—a reasonable and judicious effort was made to address validity threats and reinforce the integrity of our conclusions.

Results

Findings revealed that family members and teachers encouraged boys to stay committed to school, thereby supporting high school graduation, academic confidence, and educational aspirations for higher education. However, boys had not learned enough about the complicated process of college and fellowship applications to execute their educational goals, leaving them to wonder "what's next?" The following section outlines each of these themes in more detail.

Educational Aspirations: College Overseas

Over 50% of the Black male students who entered high school with the participants in this study eventually left the school. Therefore, until recently, finishing high school had been the foremost aspiration for the Black Bermudian male high school seniors in this study. These students, on the verge of graduation,

were thinking ahead, and all but one student planned to attend college in Bermuda, overseas, or both. Bermuda College is the only institution of higher learning in Bermuda and offers a 2-year associates degree or certificates in a variety of vocation-oriented fields. Students generally preferred to attend college in the United States, England, or Canada, so that they could achieve a 4-year degree and gain greater cultural knowledge and social experience. However, many planned to attend Bermuda College first in order to raise their grades, build their resumes, or take entry-level college classes in their fields of interest. Others planned to take classes at Bermuda College where they could prepare their overseas college applications, apply for scholarships, or simply take time to figure out what they really wanted to do. They all believed that college would help them achieve their professional and income goals.¹

Students expressed a preference for going to college overseas because they wanted to see the world and experience life outside the very small island of Bermuda. They believed the atmosphere of Bermuda College would be “too laid back” because they knew so many of the students and feared they might be distracted by their friends. For example, Anthony explained that he would go to Bermuda College until he could find the financial means of going to college overseas, but he was not pleased with that option.²

I would rather go straightaway to get the experience. I don't wanna be, you know, stuck in Bermuda College all laid back. I wanna experience new things. Cuz college ain't just learning in books, it's about learning in life, too.

Regino, age 18, was not willing to attend Bermuda College at all. He worried that he would be distracted by all the people that he knew. He explained,

I feel like I got distracted cuz I know too much people, and I know almost everybody that goes to Bermuda College. So I would go up there and just—I would do work, my work, but I just wouldn't, I don't know, I get distracted easy. With all them people up there, all my real year and older than me and I know a lot of people, like I'm a very popular person. Like, a lot people down in Bermuda know me. And me going to Bermuda College—like I'll do my work but I'll get distracted cause that's all my friends that I go to school with and all, cause I'm been from around here it's like oh right. My friends are back.

Getting distracted by friends was a problem for Regino in high school and he almost dropped out. Once he overcame that hurdle and was on the road to graduate, he feared he would get to Bermuda College and experience the

challenges of high school all over again. Although peers were not identified as critical contributors to their educational and professional aspirations, Regino, and others, identified peers as potential obstacles to their success at Bermuda College.

Perceiving Bermuda College as not very serious left students concerned that the academic environment would not be rigorous enough to aptly prepare them for international work or top paying jobs. For example, Justin, age 18, explained that he would still want to go away even if Bermuda College offered a 4-year degree because he believed that Bermuda College leaves students ill-prepared to compete in a corporate environment.

I think like Bermuda College is like, I guess, is meant for work in Bermuda. You can't, you know, do your four years at Bermuda College and then expect to work in some big bank or exempt company away, like because it's more, like I said, it's probably more rigorous out there. That's why I believe that if you go away, like to college out there, they teach you like how it is out there, and so you can be more, you know, preferred.

Colleges overseas were viewed as more competitive and as providing better preparation for the workforce.

In summary, these boys on the track to graduate high school had high educational aspirations. They planned to graduate and to attend higher education. Perceptions that Bermuda College is laid back and lacks rigor, that it will not prepare students for the workforce, and is full of their friends with seemingly low ambitions made college overseas the ultimate aspiration. Furthermore, colleges overseas promise exposures to new cultural experiences and social opportunities. In the next section, we will see the nuanced ways in which these educational aspirations have been informed by both their families and teachers.

Family Support: Stay in School

All participants had someone in their family who encouraged them to finish high school and to go further in school. In this analysis, boys reported on the messages they received from their mothers, fathers, and extended family.

Mom: High expectations. Almost all participants lived with their biological mothers, and a large majority of the boys reported that their mothers had the most influence over their educational and career decisions. Students consistently said that school would lead to a better life, and when asked who had instilled this belief in them, they repeatedly named their mothers. For

example, Anthony knew that his mother wanted him to be “you know, successful.” He explained,

She’s hoping the best for me. Go as far as I can go. Don’t stop. . . . She wants to get me the best education. [She wants you to go to college?] Yea. College, get that top notch education, make something out of myself.

Several boys spoke about a time in high school when they considered dropping out, but their mothers’ concern and encouragement kept them, and was continuing to keep them, on track to graduate and focused on their goals for the future. For example, Armel, age 18, shared the challenges that he faced in his third year of high school and how his Mom inspired him to stay in school by explaining how he would not even get the simplest job without a high school diploma.

I just didn’t find school interesting that much or nothing. I felt like dropping out. I wasn’t gonna do it but I just felt like it so much. I just knew that as long as I get through high school it will be way better off than not going through it, so I just kept that in my head. [What made you think that?] Because my mama and everybody else keeps talking about how you should have a high school diploma before, well a lot of jobs, even the simplest jobs nowadays they said, so it’s even inspiring me more to do it. I don’t wanna be living like no bum or anything. I wanna make something out of myself, so, I stayed in and my grade point average last year was low, like 2.1, but I think it’s up higher this year.

Fear of becoming “a bum” kept Armel in school and motivated him to improve his grades. At the time of the interview, his Mom was after him to submit his application to Bermuda College, and she was repeatedly reminding him that he needed to “do something” with himself. Boys reported that their mothers were often worried that they would abandon their education, so they frequently sent the message to stay in school so that they might realize their occupational and income goals.

Dad: Go to college and stay out of trouble. Only five out of the 18 participants lived with their biological fathers, two of the fathers were deceased and five of the fathers lived overseas (three in the United States and two in Jamaica). The amount of contact boys had with their fathers varied from every day to never. None of the fathers had a college degree, and two of the boys admitted to having fathers who were deeply involved in drugs. Though

few of the boys lived with their fathers, most boys thought their fathers cared about their education and hoped they would pursue college overseas. For example, Kyle, who lived with his Dad, was encouraged to get experience outside of Bermuda. Kyle states,

He (Dad) wants to kick me off the island. He says that all the time. He's joking, yeah. I'm going to kick you off the island, go to school. Just get some experience already. . . . Just get school experience off the island, like just don't stay here and go to Bermuda College. You'll get a mediocre degree, when you can go farther—master's, PhD, whatever. It's good to get more experience from being off the island.

Kyle's dad was pushing him to aim higher than the associate's degree that is offered at Bermuda College.

Fathers also encouraged their sons to attend colleges overseas because they were worried that if their sons stayed in Bermuda, they would get into trouble with girls, drugs, or violence. For example, Wesley's dad worked at the jail and was telling Wesley about all of the brewing trouble in Bermuda.

My daddy wants me to go away to college and he just wants me to get outta Bermuda like cause Bermuda's all, getting all crazy right now. [What do you mean by that?] Like all the trouble that's going on, beef type of thing. Yea and he's at the prison also. So he tells me what's gonna go down and he said during the summertime there might be like, beef—like gun war. He thinks it might increase. So he just wants me to get outta Bermuda, just, you know, succeed in life. Just do what I gotta do, don't do wrong.

Similarly, when David saw his dad on the weekends,

We talk about career choices and stuff like that, like college, schooling, like he's big on my education too because they know my potential, like so they don't, they just don't want to see me mess up type of thing.

According to the Bermuda Police Service (2010), violent crime rose 6.2% and firearm offenses increased 82% compared with the previous year. Fathers, like Wesley's and David's, hoped that school would keep their sons out of trouble and prevent them from "messing up." Boys did not always speak with their fathers on a regular basis but explained that when they did,

they always talked about school, suggesting that they believed their fathers were concerned about their education.

Extended family: Stay focused on school. Most students mentioned at least one other family member who, like their parents, regularly encouraged them to remain committed to education. Aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and grandmothers all offered educational guidance in various ways, including help with homework, resumes, or college applications; sharing of personal experience from college or what happened after they dropped out of high school; and encouragement to stay in school and out of trouble. For example, Justin, whose brothers did not go to college, explained that they were giving him “good advice . . . They just say ‘don’t get caught up. Just finish school and go to college, you know, just don’t get caught up in no bad stuff, you know.’” Family members frequently shared personal experiences with the boys. Anthony’s uncles were college graduates and offered some insight into what college would be like. “They, you know, explain to me that college is not going to be easy. You’ll have your fun times, and your ups and downs, like high school.” Another student had uncles who were high school drop-outs; they explained to him the adverse effects of their educational choices.

They have told me that they didn’t get to finish school and they’re not in a position that they would like to be in, so if they would’ve finished school they could’ve been a job manager or a CEO of a company, but since they don’t have their high school diploma they cannot really go too far in life. [What do they do?] Well, I know one of my uncles pumps gas and one of them he, he drives trucks for a company.

Similarly, Markus’s cousin hoped that Markus would not make the same mistakes he made.

(My cousin) wants me to stay focused and stay in school and make something of myself. . . . He told me how his drug habit, like his drugs like got him in trouble and all and he was talking to me and he grabbed me and he said “let me tell you something, if I ever hear of you smoking weed you’ and that’s all he said to me, and I was like you know I’m not going to do that and he goes ‘I’m just playing with you man, but seriously don’t do it.’” He jokes around like that but he says there are some decisions that you have to make just think about what you’re making though. Think about what happens later on.

Markus’s cousin reminded him to think about how his current actions might relate to his options in the future. These boys were absorbing the advice they

get from their loved ones. Even when they could not always articulate their plans for the future, they appreciated it when their family members asked them about it and exhibited interest.

Together, these findings shed light on the social environment of the boys in this study and explain the boys' aspirations of attending colleges overseas. Fathers and extended family members warn boys not to make the same mistakes that they did and relay the message that staying in school would protect them from becoming entrenched in the community violence of which so many Black Bermudians are exposed. Mothers and fathers both encourage their sons to go as far as they can in school and to even go overseas so that they can both stay out of trouble in Bermuda and achieve more than the associate's degree offered at Bermuda College.

School Support: Stick With It and Don't Give Up

Almost all students could identify at least one adult in the school who helped them choose classes and complete their schoolwork and who provided encouragement and advice about life after high school. These adults consistently sent the message to stick with education by working and trying hard in school.

Will, age 18, explained that the teachers hoped that his education would not end at graduation. Teachers cared about his plans after graduation and hoped:

That I'll be fine and go to college or university to get a degree, because the thing is you can't go nowhere now without a degree . . . (Teachers say,) "In order to graduate, stay focused in school. Like, high school is a stepping stone towards your future."

Teachers advised Will to go to college, and he planned to attend Bermuda College in the fall.

Teachers were particularly hopeful that the boys would finish high school and go on to higher education so that they would not end up "on the wall." (*On the wall* is a term used in Bermuda to describe those who are unemployed and idle. Those who are "on the wall" are frequently perceived as a primary source of crime on the island.) Justin explained,

They [teachers] want to stop seeing the guys just either drop out of high school, or finish high school and just be done with their education, and they want to see the guys go and get those good jobs, like instead of just being thugs and all of that . . . just worry about your

education so it can take you somewhere. . . . They even tell you, "I don't want to see you sitting on a wall and doing—sellin' drugs and doing stuff like that."

For the teachers and school staff, education is the key to avoiding the wall.

Several boys shared stories of times when they were considering dropping out of high school but stayed with the encouragement of their teachers. For example, when Wesley felt like he could not cope with school anymore, he left and sat on the wall at the bottom of the hill. His teachers brought him back.

I was like "yea man I dropping out, I can't take this school no more" and I walked out of school one day, then somebody came out and got me and brought me back, had a big meeting there. I was like down there sitting on the wall.

Wesley knew that his teachers liked him because "they put up with me for these 4 years. They would have given up on me." They did not give up on him. Instead, they encouraged him to do his work so that he could "pass and try to graduate" and they brought in his parents to ensure that he completed all the graduation requirements. They also advised him to go to college. Consequently, Wesley felt cared for by the teachers because they brought him back from the wall, convinced him to stay in school, supported his efforts to graduate, and even believed that he could obtain higher education. He became highly motivated to show them that he could do it.

Similarly, Dwayne was planning to drop out of school and was "lackadaisical" about his schoolwork. But when he met his basketball coach in his first year of S3, the equivalent of his junior year, which he was repeating, he started "sticking by his side and just learning everything he knows and he changed my life." Instead of dropping out of school to support his sick mother, his coach advised him to stay in school so that he might secure a higher earning job.

Uh, with my mama's situation. How she's been in the hospital and stuff. Like that was a reason why I wanted to drop out so I could make some money to help her. But he was trying to tell me if I stayed in school, the money that I was going to make, I could make double that if I stay in school and get a high school diploma. So he gives me a lot of life stories, too. He's keeping me on the straight and narrow track. . . . [What kind of advice does he give you?] He just tells me stick with it. If you want it, go get it.

These boys had teachers who believed in them, even when they doubted themselves, leaving them motivated to “prove” that they could indeed graduate and go to college. Teachers helped them to internalize the notion that academic performance could help them “to get where they wanted to get.”

In sum, the boys in this sample were on track to graduate high school and aspired for higher education, most likely because their families and teachers had high expectations for them and supported their educational goals. Mothers and teachers were especially effective in helping many boys in our sample stay committed to graduating high school. Fathers encouraged them to stay in school and out of trouble. Extended family members shared their own experiences and encouraged boys to stick with their education to achieve their goals. This support successfully kept the boys in school but students rarely discussed the complicated process of college and fellowship applications, either at home or in school, leaving them to wonder “what next?”

What Next?

Boys reported that several members of the school staff inquired about their plans for the future and encouraged them to participate in college fairs, SAT courses, or complete college applications. For example, Derek reports that his school counselors and teachers encouraged him to take the SAT and also helped him with his plans to attend Bermuda College in the fall.

The counselors assist you with signing up for the SAT to try to get in to college. . . . They [teachers] helped me with writing my essay to get into Bermuda College. Yeah, and they also wrote a letter of reference for me. And right now they’re helping me with the CPT (college placement test). They’re helping me.

Derek’s teachers helped him with his essay, references, and placement exams. However, most students only started to discuss and explore their higher education options with their teachers, families, or guidance counselors in their senior year in high school. Consequently, boys had little knowledge about the process of applying to and choosing a college that would meet their professional interests and financial capabilities. Although most students had dreams of going overseas, they did not know where and did not seem to know that it was already too late to apply for the upcoming academic year. Few students had submitted applications and they were unable to articulate the steps it would take to apply for, and finance, an overseas college education. At the time of these interviews (toward the end of the school year), only one student had been accepted into a scholarship program and an overseas university.

For example, although Regino had no interest in attending Bermuda College, he had not yet submitted overseas college applications because he knew he had to secure a scholarship first. His sister was helping him with scholarship applications, which he described as a difficult process that would “take awhile.”

I’m applying now. I should have been done a long time ago, but I’ve been so busy I couldn’t really get a lot done. Now I’m trying to get it done so I can leave by September. Or not, stay for a year, work, and make some money. I have a job now, so. . . . [If you don’t get into college for dance what else do you think you might want to do?] I’m not even sure. I’m not even thought about a second plan.

Regino, who was not interested in Bermuda College, would likely continue to work at the shipping company where he was employed.

Students were also unclear about Bermuda College course requirements or if Bermuda College offered courses in their fields of interest. For example, Kyle, age 17, stated,

[So do you feel that you took the classes necessary to be able to go into marine biology at Bermuda College?] I’m not sure what the requirements for that college is. . . . I’m not sure how good the science is of the college, because I didn’t go into too much detail on that.

Like most students, Kyle had not done much research about the options at Bermuda College, or anywhere else.

Students had some ideas about how their school could be more helpful. For example, according to Charles,

They should try to find out what the student wants to do when they grow up, so they could push you towards it. I know it sounds like a backup, but push you towards it so they could get there instead of just coming to the last year asking them what they want to do, and then telling them what they need to do to get there.

As Charles suggested, educators who engage students in ongoing discussions about what they want to be have the capacity to motivate students to stay in school and plan for life after high school. Another student, Markus, was deeply disappointed by the college planning program.

The college planning program here is a complete let-down because it goes in depth in what you should do but they just don't really help you fully. Like I don't feel like I got any decent support here. All the information I found on my own, on my own research. So, it's really not helpful. [Does that college support program happens in your senior year or earlier?] Senior year. Yeah a little bit late to try to get you ahead. [Before senior year did anyone do any sort of career planning?] No, I mean, I've had people ask me, like the counselors will ask you, "what do you want to do" and they'll call you in like once every eight-months or so. You'll see them maybe once or twice every couple years but they don't really sit down and they don't go over like, oh okay well, what's your skills? What's your ambition? How much money would you like to make?

Asking Black male students to contemplate their futures and what they want at the start of high school may result in more deliberate and early action about higher education.

In sum, boys valued the academic encouragement and guidance about life after high school that they received from their teachers, and they believed that teachers cared about their futures. These relationships helped these boys achieve their graduation goals but left them ill prepared to achieve their aspirations for higher education. With earlier connections between school performance and college and career aspirations, these teacher-student relationships could promote even greater results. An emphasis on life after high school when boys enter high school, coupled with adult support, might help students think about their interests, generate goals, and develop the confidence to believe that they can meet them.

Discussion

This study explored how Black Bermudian high school seniors articulated their plans for the future and detailed how Bermuda's family and schooling mesosystem works well at helping young Black men graduate high school, but does not work well at moving them beyond graduation. This research was guided by theoretical and empirical research suggesting that positive family and teacher-student relationships are critical protective factors for adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Resnick et al., 1997; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000) and contribute to the educational and professional attainment of Black men (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Noguera, 2009).

This section reviews our findings in the context of the research literature on the educational attainment of Black students in the United States, offers policy suggestions, and addresses the limitations of the study.

Familial and Teacher Support in Adolescence

Developmentally, adolescents have not only an increasing breadth of vision but also a decreasing sense of certainty about themselves, their relationships, and their communities, and they need support and guidance as they make difficult and complicated decisions (Keating, 1990). Families and schools are the most likely contexts in which adolescents receive this type of guidance. These relationships have been found to be especially important for the educational aspirations and attainment of Black adolescents and young men in the United States (Dubow et al., 2001; Nichols et al., 2010; Noguera, 2009). For example, perceived parental educational involvement and educational expectations are associated with higher educational aspirations among Black adolescent males in the United States. Indeed, the Black Bermudian male participants in this study, who were near high school completion, often discussed times when they questioned their commitment to school. With the support and encouragement of a family member in their lives, oftentimes their mothers, they came to associate school performance and attainment with their goals for the future.

Family members not only encouraged these adolescent boys to stay in school, they also shared own life experiences to convey the importance of staying out of trouble. In the United States, Black male students are more likely than any other group to be punished in school and are more likely to receive discipline referrals, detentions, and suspensions (Noguera, 2009; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). It is likely that institutional inequalities have forced Black families to convey that staying out of trouble goes hand in hand with staying in school.

For those without educational support at home, support in school is especially critical. The literature suggests that teacher-student relationships can have a far-reaching impact for Black male students, including improved academic performance, higher educational attainment, and higher expectations for the future (Noguera, 2009). The boys in this study experienced teachers who were available for assistance and support, which helped them achieve graduation, higher school engagement, and positive expectations for the future. Cokley (2003) found that faculty encouragement was the most powerful predictor of African American college students' academic self-concept, even greater than the racial environment of the school. These findings suggest

that encouragement is an important component of positive student-teacher relationships, especially for Black students. Warm and encouraging relationships in which boys feel known and understood are crucial for the well-being of Black male students in school and can effectively serve adolescents who are at risk of dropping out as well as those who are trying to determine the next steps in their educational careers.

In Bermuda, boys face the distinct reality that there is no 4-year college and understand that they will need to go overseas to attain the educational credentials they need for jobs in Bermuda's highest paying industries. Boys in this study aspired to go overseas to achieve a bachelor's degree or higher, but their limited knowledge about college requirements, scholarships, and application processes was likely to prevent them from actualizing their educational ambitions. On the eve of high school graduation, the boys were not prepared for college overseas. Few of the parents of the boys in this sample achieved college degrees, and it is likely that they have had minimal exposure to the application process. Furthermore, with so few fathers in the home and with so few Black Bermudian men in higher earning industries, boys have limited exposure to the variety of career and educational possibilities that require degrees in higher education. In spite of their aspirations for higher education, perhaps high school graduation, and some courses at Bermuda College, is all that they believed they could achieve. This study suggests that encouraging relationships at home and in school may help boys achieve high school graduation by communicating the belief that boys could indeed succeed in high school, but they are not always enough to help boys execute educational aspirations for higher education.

These findings further our cross-cultural understanding of the disadvantages facing Black male students as well as the contributions of families and teachers to the educational aspirations of Black boys. In economies where a high school degree is not enough to earn a family sustaining income, high schools must not only keep boys in school but must also help them develop clear goals about the future and concrete plans for how they will achieve those goals (Mikelson, 1990; Noguera, 2009).

Although these students did not identify racism as an obstacle to their futures, the literature reveals that Black adolescents are less likely to receive college preparatory assistance in or out of school than White adolescents (Noguera, 2009). In Bermuda, the public schools provide for a predominantly Black Bermudian population, whereas the private schools primarily serve White students, and professionally, occupational segregation prevents them from competing for the same jobs. Therefore, although participants may have little direct experience with inequality, they are not likely to be exposed to the

same opportunities afforded to White Bermudians. This study has important implications for intervention strategies designed to increase educational aspirations and eventual educational and professional achievement among Black adolescents and men (Nichols et al., 2010).

Career Counseling and Guidance

Noguera (2009) found that urban students who had the clearest goals were most likely to cite an adult—a teacher, a counselor, a parent, or a relative—as the source of guidance related to future aspirations. These adults “helped them recognize their own potential and how they opened doors that they previously did not know existed” (Noguera, 2009, p.15). Some researchers suggest that families in the Caribbean are more likely to support the educational attainment of girls (Quinlan, 2006). This may be true in Bermuda, considering 50% of the Black boys drop out of high school in Bermuda as compared with less than one third of girls (Ministry of Education, 2009). But for those near completion, boys identify their families, particularly their mothers, as encouraging their educational success. Programs designed to help Bermudian mothers guide their sons through the process of applying to colleges overseas are likely to positively impact the educational attainment of Black Bermudian adolescents.

For the Bermudian context, it is also recommended that the career and college guidance departments in the Bermudian public secondary schools devote many more resources for Black male students. In school, boys reported that most of the college and career guidance they received was in their final year of high school. Guidance counselors should expose students to a variety of educational and career options and allow students to begin to identify their interests and articulate educational and professional goals right at the start of high school. This relational connection applies perhaps equally well to students who are at risk of dropping out and students who are likely to graduate and go on to higher education. Individual student needs can be identified and responded to within the context of these relationships between guidance counselors and students. Students who are thinking about dropping out can receive guidance in the consequences of alternative pathways, and students who are thinking about higher education can identify the steps they need to take to achieve their goals. Guidance counselors might help students, and their families, understand college requirements, the college application process, and help students identify scholarships, internships, and more. Counselors who guide students through decisions and problems not only send the message that the school sees their education as a priority but also

help students conceptualize the long-term consequences of various actions before it is too late. Personalized guidance and ongoing monitoring of student progress are likely to promote school engagement, confidence, and motivation among Black male students because their efforts in school are placed in the context of their own goals (Mikelson, 1990). Empirical studies in the United States have revealed that Black boys with clear plans for the future are more likely to attend school regularly, to become involved in after-school activities, and to complete their assignments on time, and are less likely to get into trouble at school than those with ambiguous ideas about the future (Mikelson, 1990; Noguera, 2009). More engagement with adults in the school might also serve to identify other problems boys are facing that inhibit their educational attainment. For example, Barbarin (2010) suggests that guidance and academic encouragement are more likely to keep boys engaged in school when they also address the sources of problems in the home, school, or community and enlist families as partners.

Limitations and Future Research

Methodological and sample limitations are the most important reason for caution in interpreting the findings of our study and drawing policy implications. Although this study offered information about Black Bermudian male adolescents, the generalizability of the results are limited. This study took place in a particular public school and whether similar results would be found among Black Bermudian male adolescents in a private school setting where there are more White students and foreign-born teachers is unclear. The boys in this study were in their final year of high school and on the pathway toward graduation. In order to explore the reasons Black Bermudian adolescents do not finish high school and the perceived barriers to their occupational success or career goals, future research might include other samples of the Bermudian population such as girls, White male adolescents, private school students, Black male middle school and early high school students (before they are of the age where they might drop out of school), young out of school Black men, or parents and teachers. A historical analysis that examines why parents and teachers offer the advice that they do would also enhance our understanding of these findings. Furthermore, there is still much to be learned about the complexities of the experiences of Black boys and adolescents in school worldwide. Future research should examine the phenomenological experiences of the young Black male population in a variety of educational and professional environments to better understand the contributing factors to their marginalization, and to increase their academic attainment and success.

This study offers a glimpse into the messages Black adolescents receive regarding their education and has important implications for intervention strategies designed to increase their educational aspirations and eventual educational and professional achievement. Future research might examine the effectiveness of such interventions.

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Notes

1. Most students have some ideas regarding their preferred career paths but are still considering multiple options: 38.9% express interest in the trades professions (electrical, carpentry, computer technician, or emergency medical technician), 27.8% are interested in the arts (graphic design, photography, dance, or film), 27.8% are interested in pursuing professional sports (football, cricket, or basketball), and 16.7% are interested in the sciences (marine biology or engineering). One student is interested in becoming a lawyer, but none express interest in the very lucrative field of finance in Bermuda.
2. Throughout this article, parentheses are used to insert words that were not stated by the participant and brackets indicate that the interviewer is speaking. An ellipsis is used to indicate that a portion of the text has been omitted.

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