



Published in final edited form as:

*J Negro Educ.* 2009 July 1; 78(3): 277–289.

## Mentoring urban Black Middle-School Male Students: Implications for Academic Achievement

**Derrick M. Gordon,**

Yale University School of Medicine

**Derek Iwamoto,**

Yale University School of Medicine

**Nadia Ward,**

Yale University School of Medicine

**Randolph Potts,** and

Private Practice

**Elizabeth Boyd**

The University of South Dakota

### Abstract

Researchers have called for innovative and culturally responsive intervention programs to enhance male, African American middle school students' academic achievement. Mentoring has received considerable attention as a novel remedy. Although anecdotal evidence supports the positive role of mentoring on academic achievement, these results are not consistent. The Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) builds on the ideals of mentoring to counter the effects academic underachievement among adolescent Black males by building a model that is Afro-centric, uses pro-social modeling, and emphasizes cultural strengths and pride, and single-sex instruction in a dual-sex educational environment. Sixty-one middle-school Black males were enrolled (BEMI:  $n=29$ ; Comparison:  $n=32$ ) in this study. Results revealed that students in the BEMI program had significantly greater academic attachment scores and academic success than their non-mentored peers. Additionally, racial identity attitudes of immersion/emersion and internalization and identification with academics were also significantly associated with standardized achievement tests and GPA. Policy and practice implications are discussed.

---

A myriad of studies have documented how institutional, environmental, and individual factors contribute to the achievement gap between Black and White students (Stinson, 2006). While education is the institution used in America to distribute social status, distribute economic power, and facilitate how society functions, it has not accepted and provided equal opportunity to all members of this society (Ogbu, 1997, 2003). Understanding how education is used to distribute the resources of society requires careful attention to the factors that preclude and those that promote equal opportunity and academic success for African American youth, and specifically boys (Stinson, 2006). Many of the studies that examine academic differences have been deficit-focused with emphasis on lower standardized test scores compared to White students, the experience of cultural deprivation and structural discrimination, an "anti-intellectual" attitude, and less socialization to education achievement (Cokley, 2003; Griffin

& Allen, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Stinson, 2006). A burgeoning amount of investigations have begun to examine the factors that foster the academic success and achievement of African American students including mentoring, racial identity, and identification with academics (Awad, 2007; Datnow, & Cooper, 1998; Harris, 1999; Osborne, 1999; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997).

Building interventions that understand the factors that preclude and include African American students in the academic environment is crucial to lessening their adverse experiences. Little research has examined the effectiveness of culturally informed mentoring strategies on academic achievement for early adolescent African American, middle school boys. This study seeks to build this work by examining the impact of an Afro-centric mentoring intervention on the academic success of African American, middle school boys. The study also examines the effects of racial identity and identification with academics on state-wide standardized test, and eighth-grade point average. The value of this approach rests on Awad's (2007) observations that few studies have explored the relationship between cultural factors and standardized achievement tests.

### **Identification with Academics and Academic Achievement**

Several scholars hypothesize that student's identification with academics is an important component of academic success (Griffin, 2002; Osborne, 1999). Operationally, academic identification is "the extent to which academic pursuits and outcomes form the basis for global self-evaluation" (Osborne 1999, p.59). Osborne asserts that students who have high identification with academics will be more motivated to perform academically since their self-esteem is tied to their academic success. On the other hand, if a student has low identification with academics, they are more likely to detach from academic tasks, thus are more likely to perform poorly academically. Accordingly, African American students' school identification has been shown to impact their academic motivation, performance, and success (Griffin & Allen, 2006; Griffin, 2002; Osborne, 1999). Identification with academics is especially relevant to Black males given that this group disproportionately experience more tracking into low-ability groups, are socially and economically isolated from their classmates, receive more frequent and harsher disciplinary actions, and tend to be held in lower academic regard by their teachers (Osborne, 1999; Stinson, 2006; Voelkl, 1996).

Therefore, understanding the academic barriers of African American male students must also include how the emic, or intra-cultural, and etic, structural forces, work to isolate collectively and alienate these students from academia. Etic sources of distress for African American students is based on Steele's (1992) observation that for these students' school is simply the place where they learn they are not valued. Identification with academics has been described as dependent on belonging to the school where one is a significant member of the community, accepted and respected in school, is included in the school, and includes school as part of one's self definition (Voelkl, 1996). Emic sources of distress reside in the identification with academics where school is important and useful to one's future success. This discussion begins to lay the foundation for the examination of school alienation experienced through the social structures, roles, and functions that result in the individual being fragmented in their experience. Black male students in particular are challenged with this issue given that they "must matriculate in an atmosphere that feels hostile, [which] arouses defensive reactions that interfere with [their] intellectual performance" (Steele, 1992, p. 75). Aronson and Steele (2005) argued that these students may feel stereotyped and alienated, with the resultant behavior of disconnecting their self-evaluation from their academic performance. Understanding and building culturally and racially congruent coping strategies that help decrease the deleterious effects of stereotyping and alienating experiences on Black middle

school students is warranted. One concept that might explain how stereotypes are internalized and the reasons students become disengaged with academics is racial identity theory.

### Racial Identity Development

According to Erikson (1968), “identity,” a critical task faced by adolescents, is achieved during adolescence through a process of crisis (exploration of alternatives) and commitment (a decision reflecting personal investment). Identity possesses individual factors and draws from one’s personal history and place in history. For most visible minorities, or those who can be physically identified as belonging to a minority group, their status is likely to impact their interactions regardless of the attention paid or value given by the individual (Maldonado, 1975; Stinson, 2006). Cross, Parham and Helms (1996) noted that “psychologically speaking, the social history of African-Americans has been dominated by two competing processes: *deracination* or the attempt to erase Black consciousness, and *nigrescence* or the development of Afro-American identity” (p. 2). The process of “becoming Black” was described as an omnipresent theme in Black social history and illustrated in the biographies and accounts of influential Black Americans (Cross, Parham & Helms, 1996).

Racial identity theory describes how individuals internalize and react to racial oppression and discrimination. Operationally, racial identity is reflective of the process and complexity inherent in one’s attitudes towards race and racial issues (Awad, 2007; Helms & Parham, 1996). Although there are numerous racial identity theories (Cross, 1995; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998), this study focuses on Helm and Parham’s (1996) model that is based on Cross’ (1971) model of nigrescence. According to Helm and Parham (1996) during the *pre-encounter* status race is not a salient component of the individual’s life. The individual has a race-neutral stance and minimizes racism and race-related issues. This status is also reflective of self-hatred. *Encounter* signifies a time in which “the individuals notion about personal or “social event(s) that foster change in the individual’s conceptualization of identity” (Lockett & Harrell, 2003). In the *immersion/emersion* status, previous held notions about race are eliminated and the individual attempts to immerse themselves in Black culture. The individual also hold strong negative sentiment towards whites in general for the historical and current injustice inflicted on African Americans. *Internalization* status represents resolution to previous racial identity conflict and the individual is able to “internalized positive Black identity. There are divergent views on the process of racial identity and its development, but consistent support for its value in the academic success of African American students (Cross, 1991; Harper, 2007; Helms & Parham, 1996).

There has been mixed evidence about how racial identity might impact academic achievement. Further there are relatively few studies that have investigated the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement among African American middle school students. In a high school sample, Witherspoon, Speight, and Thomas (1997) examined the relationship between racial identity statuses, academic self concept, self esteem and GPA. They found that students who held immersion attitudes had lower GPA. They speculated that students who held immersion viewed might have anti-White sentiment or feel disconnect with what the students perceive as a “White education system.” Consequently, Witherspoon and colleagues postulated that the students with strong immersion attitudes might equate academic related behavior as “White behavior” (p. 353). However, other studies with older and college age samples did not replicate these findings. Lockett and Harrell (2003) detected an association between internalization status and GPA, while Awad (2007) found no relationship between racial identity status and academic achievement (measured by GPA and Graduate Record Examination scores). Awad (2007) noted the discrepant results could be due to the psychometric properties of the racial identity measure in Witherspoon et al.’s study. Additionally, we contend that these contrasting findings could also be due to developmental

differences between the high school and college samples (Berk, 2006). It may be that the process of developing one's racial identity has varying intrinsic meaning for middle-school and high school students compared to college students. These observations underscore the importance of investigating further the potential effects of racial identity on academic achievement for Black male middle school students.

## Mentoring

To address these issues, researchers have called for innovative and rigorous interventions that clearly define and outline the problems faced by adolescent Black male students and how the intervention will ameliorate these issues. One intervention that has received some attention as a novel and innovative intervention is mentoring. Mentoring is defined as the positive relationship with and contribution by a non-parental adult to the life of a young person (Baker & McGuire, 2005; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006). Rhodes (2001) argued that mentoring can have a number of positive effects on developing healthy psychological development. Several researchers (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006) suggest that for mentoring program to be effective there should be reasonably frequent contact, sufficient interactive time together, and the mentee achieves their objectives and accepts the collaborative experience with six separate functions: 1) emphasis on the relationship, (2) emphasis on information exchange, (3) focusing on facilitation, (4) focusing on confrontation, (5) attention to their role as a model for the mentee, and (6) attention to the vision that the mentee brings to the relationship. Any mentoring relationship is built on mutual trust, use of accurate and reliable information, reasonable goals, decisions, and options; challenge ideas, beliefs, and actions; holistic support (intellectual, psychological, emotional); and encouragement for their dreams (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006). The relationship between mentoring and education has been documented in the educational literature. Cohen and Galbraith (1995) indicated that mentoring could be used to counter the attitude that "no one cares" experienced by students. Bowman and Howard (1985) observed that an active stance to barriers was resilience promoting in an environment [world] that can be nonresponsive to the academic needs of Black youth.

Several scholars have highlighted how Afro-centric worldview should be incorporated in mentoring programs (Harris, 1999; Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003). Utsey and colleagues note the importance of incorporating Afro-centric worldview in order to "understand the psychological function and behaviors of African Americans" (p.128). It is believed that Afro-centric programming could help foster African American boys' understanding of their cultural and historic roots (Asante, 1998; Harris, 1999) as well as encourage pro-social behavior (Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003). Given the Afro-centric framework focuses on collectiveness and incorporating one's community, interactions with successful African American community members could nurture a sense of connectedness with others and provide educationally successful positive role. An Afro-centric framework is congruent with the concept of mentoring and may help empower traditionally disenfranchised groups such as African American boys (Asante, 1998).

In sum, the review of the literature highlights how academic identification, racial identity and mentoring using an Afro-centric framework may be important protective factors for academic achievement among African American students. However, no published study has examined how these factors collectively contribute to academic success of African American middle school boys. Additionally, there is a paucity of published research that has studied the effectiveness of Afro-centric mentoring programs on academic performance of African American middle school boys. The purpose of this study is to address the gaps in the literature by investigating the impact of involvement in the Benjamin E. Mays Institute's (BEMI) mentoring program on racial identity development, academic identification, and academic

performance for Black, male 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. The first aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a 8<sup>th</sup> grade mentoring program in increasing the academic performance, cultural consciousness, and attitudes towards academics in a cohort of middle school, African American males enrolled in a single-sex cluster in a dual-sex educational context. The second aim investigates the relationship between racial identity, identification with academics, standardized tests performance, and grade point average (GPA) for all of the study participants. We hypothesize that BEMI students will exhibit significantly higher racial identity, as measured by significantly higher scores on the internalization scale and significantly lower scores on the pre-encounter, emersion/immersion than the non-mentored comparison group students. BEMI students will exhibit significantly higher identification with academics scores compared to the Control group. Finally we postulated that the BEMI students will exhibit significantly higher Connecticut statewide standardized achievement test than control students.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were drawn from a large urban middle-school in Hartford, CT. The majority of the students enrolled in the school were African American (83%) and Latinos (16.7%); 88.7% of the students in the school were eligible for free or reduced lunches. Sixty one African American 8<sup>th</sup> grade male students participated in the study. The average age of the participant was 13.88 (SD = .72). There were two groups of students: Benjamin E. Mays (BEMI) group that received the intervention (n = 29), and 32 students were included in the non-equivalent comparison group (Comparison) whom did not receive the intervention.

The young men who made up the comparison group were also enrolled 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who had similar backgrounds to the BEMI students. The young men who made up the comparison group received instruction in a dual sex classroom. This class of young men was a priori selected to be the comparison group by the principal of the school.

The students selected into the BEMI group entered the program during fall of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Students were selected for the BEMI program using the following criteria: (1) Students who had repeated a grade but expressed an interest in improving themselves academically; (2) 20% of the students entering the middle school who have been labeled as “at risk” by their previous instructors; (3) demonstrated attributes which included cooperation, determination, focus, appropriate behavior, consistent attendance, and positive problem-solving approach; and (4) willingness to participate in community activities at least two hours per month.

### Procedures

Consent and approval to administer the survey to the students were obtained from the school, parental figures and students. Consent was obtained by direct mailing to the parents and follow-up telephone calls. The instruments were administered to the students in group form at the middle school. The respective class teachers were available during this time to assist with the management of the students. Students were informed that their participation was optional and that they could withdraw at any time. The researcher was available to address any of the students’ questions or concerns.

### Intervention/Prevention Program: Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI)

The BEMI program is an all male cluster housed within a regular school of dual sex coeducational classrooms and instruction. Students selected for the BEMI cluster at the Middle School were referred to the cluster by teachers, students, and administrators. The main goal of the Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) is to impact the intellectual, spiritual, physical, and social needs of the students served through role modeling and mentoring. Central to the efforts

of BEMI is the integration of positive male role models for students who participate in the program. The students' instruction was delivered by male instructors in their major subject areas (mathematics, science, English, and history). Every Wednesday, the students were expected to dress in professional attire and host a local business and or community leaders. These community members provided instruction to the students from their area of expertise. Further, the students got an opportunity during these interactions to explore with the professional the rewards and benefits of their job. One-on-one mentors were selected from surrounding universities and the local public and private sectors. The mentors met with their mentee weekly in planned activities. The BEMI mentoring program also sponsored structured events for the mentors, mentees, parents, and school personnel where they were able to interact, share and develop common goals around the mentoring experience and engage the parties in experiences that supported the academic development of the mentees. The mentoring program included the parents in monthly parent meetings, an advisory board responsible for guiding the program and lending support to the teachers, and educational activities that took place off-campus. A cornerstone of the experience for the students was a yearly conference that occurred at the end of the year. At this conference, the young men who were in the eighth grade and completed all of the components of the Rites of Passage were presented at the conference. To be presented, the young men were required to learn the tenants of *Sankofa*, complete a community project, learn traditional African dances, and perform well academically. All of the activities were planned in collaboration with the mentees; their mentors; an advisory board responsible for the oversight of the BEMI; parents; and interested community members. This structure also encouraged inter-generational mentoring between the mentees, the mentors, parents, and school staff.

The conceptual framework of the BEMI program is based on the Afro-centric paradigm of *Sankofa* (go back and fetch), *spirituality*, *Kujichagulia* (self-determination), *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *Uhuru* (freedom and social justice), and *Maat* (truth) (Akbar, 1991; Asante, 1998; Nobles, 1991). The Afro-centric framework was applicable to the mentoring program given that Sankofa's philosophy creates linkages between teachers (mentors included), students, and their ancestral wisdom while pointing them to the future (Akbar, 1991; Asante, 1998; Harris, 1999; Nobles, 1991). The integration of spirituality acknowledges and embraces the inspiration, transforming power, and personal development that each person adds to the experience. *Kujichagulia* speaks to the choice afforded the students in assuming responsibility for their education experience and community. *Ujamaa* stresses the interplay between equity and the allocation of economic resources in the community. *Uhuru* underscores the liberatory nature of education and challenges the students to explore how their educational experiences not only impact on their personal transformation and/to social action but their community. *Maat* completes the circle by integrating truth and order which serves to create reciprocal systems that are in balance with the individual, the community, and society at large.

Building on these principles, the BEMI sought to impact on self-esteem, responsibility, vision for success, self discipline, and positive role-models for its young mentees. It viewed these factors as having significant impacts on the student's academic selves. Through structure, and firm leadership, BEMI seeks to facilitate the students' ownership for their education while increasing their responsibility, self discipline, and motivation.

## Measures

The students were administered the following questionnaires: demographics, Racial identity attitudes scale (Helm & Parham, 1996), and the Identification with Academics Scale (IAS; Osborne, 1997). Grade point average and statewide standardized achievement test scores were collected from school records. Specifically, the students' 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Connecticut Mastery Test scores, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA were collected.

**Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS; Helms & Parham, 1996)**—The RIAS was used to measure the students' racial identity attitudes. The RIAS consists of four racial identity statuses: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, and internalization subscales that are congruent with Cross' (1971, 1991) Model. The scale consists of 50 items and each are rated on a five-point Likert-scale (5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree). The reliability estimates in this study were .76 for Pre-encounter, .51 for Encounter stage, .69 for Immersion/Emersion, and .80 for the Internalization status scale.

**Identification with Academics Scale (IAS)**—Osborne's (1997) was developed to assess the "extent to which a student's self-esteem is connected with and dependent upon academic outcomes" (p. 62). This scale uses a 5-point Likert scale response set ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores on this instrument indicate more identification between academic performance and self view. The Cronbach's alpha for this instrument was .72.

**Grade Point Average (GPA)**—The academic grades received by all of the students involved in this investigation were collected from school records. The grades ranged from F to A+. The cumulative grade point average was computed by using the following scale: F = 0, D- = .75, D = 1, D+ = 1.25, C- = 1.75, C = 2, C+ = 2.25, B- = 2.75, B = 3, B+ = 3.25, A- = 3.75, A = 4, and A+ = 4.25. The respective numerical representation of the students' grades were summed and divided by three to generate their cumulative GPA for the academic year of interest.

**Connecticut Mastery Test**—The scores on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) were collected from the students' academic records. The scores reflected the two domains of the test: Mathematics and Reading. The CMT was designed to assess essential reading and mathematics skills that can be expected to be mastered by most students at the end of the previous grade. The mathematics sub-test attempts to assess the skills of the students in four areas: concepts, computation, problem solving/application, and measurement/geometry. The degree of reading power sub-test is a multiple-choice measure of reading ability. Its stated goal is to measure a student's ability to understand nonfiction English prose on a graduated scale of reading difficulty. There are differing minimum standards for the CMT which are dependent on the grade of the student taking the test and the subject area of the test. For 4th grade students the state's minimum standard begins at a score of 103 for CMT Mathematics, and 50 CMT Reading. At the 6th grade level the state's minimum standard begins at a score of 122 for Mathematics, and 59 for Reading. At the 8th grade level the state's minimum standard begins at a score of 130 for Mathematics, and 64 for Reading.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Retrospective comparisons were made between academic achievement, as measured by 4th and 6th grade scores on the CMT Mathematics and Reading tests. ANOVAs were conducted and no significant mean differences were observed between the BEMI and Comparison group on their retrospective 4th grade CMT scores for Mathematics,  $F(1, 59) = .52$ , ns, and Reading,  $F(1, 59) = .12$ , ns. Significant group differences were observed between the BEMI and Comparison on their 6th grade Mathematics,  $F(1, 59) = 21.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . The BEMI group scored on the average higher ( $M = 103.53$ ,  $SD = 20.9$ ) compared to the Comparison group ( $M = 80.13$ ,  $SD = 18.76$ ). However there were no differences between group on the 6th CMT Reading,  $F(1, 59) = 3.76$ , ns. Please refer to Table 1 for a complete summary of these results.

### Research Question 1: Are there differences between groups on 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA, statewide standardized tests, racial identity statuses, and school perception?

ANCOVAs were conducted to investigate the differences between groups in academic achievement while controlling for the effects of 6<sup>th</sup> grade math achievement. The first ANCOVA revealed that the BEMI group scored significantly higher,  $F(1, 59) = 111.31, p < .001$ , compared to the Comparison group on GPA. The average GPA for the BEMI group was 2.89 ( $SD = .5$ ) compared to a 1.06 ( $SD = .57$ ) GPA for the Comparison group. When comparing the groups on 8<sup>th</sup> grade CMT Mathematics scores, the BEMI group had higher scores ( $M = 122.46, SD = 23.26$ ) in contrast to the Comparison group ( $M = 94.26, SD = 26.23$ ),  $F(1, 59) = 3.98, p < .05$ . Finally, the two groups 8<sup>th</sup> grade CMT scores on Reading did not differ from one another,  $F(1, 59) = .146, ns$ .

ANOVA findings indicated that the BEMI group was more identified with academics,  $F(1, 59) = 5.36, p < .03$ , had higher endorsement of internalization racial identity attitudes,  $F(1, 59) = 4.22, p < .05$ , and lower pre-encounter scores,  $F(1, 59) = 12.47, p < .001$ , compared to Comparison group. No statistically significant effects were detected between group on the encounter and immersion/emersion scores, though the BEMI group had lower, but not significant, scores on the two measures.

### Research Question 2: Does racial identity status and identification with academics predicted academic achievement outcomes?

Three simultaneous multiple regressions were performed to examine the predictors of GPA, and CMT Math and Reading scores. The predictors included the four racial identity statuses and the identification with academics measure. In the first regression model with GPA as the outcome was significant,  $F(5, 53) = 5.36, p < .001$ . The predictors in the model accounted for 34% (adjusted  $R^2 = .27$ ) of the variance in GPA. Individuals who had higher identification with academics scores ( $\beta = .30, p < .02$ ) and internalization attitudes ( $\beta = .24, p < .05$ ) had higher GPA. Pre-encounter attitudes approached significance ( $\beta = -.25, p < .06$ ). Please refer to Table 2 for a complete summary of the results.

The regression model with 8<sup>th</sup> grade CMT Mathematics as the criterion was significant,  $F(5, 52) = 4.96, p < .001$ . Thirty-two percent of the variance (adjusted  $R^2 = .26$ ) in CMT Mathematics scores were accounted by the predictors in the model, however only one variable in the model was significant. Individuals who held higher internalization racial identity attitudes ( $\beta = .31, p < .02$ ) tended to have higher CMT Mathematics scores. (see Table 2).

The final regression model predicting CMT Reading was also significant,  $F(5, 52) = 3.69, p < .006$ . In this model the predictors explained 26% of the variance (adjusted  $R^2 = .19$ ) in the CMT Reading. The most robust predictor in this model was immersion/emersion racial identity attitudes scores ( $\beta = -.37, p < .02$ ), followed by internalization attitudes ( $\beta = .27, p < .05$ ). These findings suggest that students who hold higher internalization attitudes and lower immersion/emersion attitudes tended to score higher on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade CMT Reading achievement test. (see Table 2)..

## Discussion

Few studies have empirically investigated how mentoring program positively impacts academic achievement among 8<sup>th</sup> grade African American boys. This study contributes to the literature by providing support for the effectiveness of an Afro-centric mentoring program in fostering academic success and achievement of middle school African American boys. This study also identified how the factors of racial identity statuses and identification with academics are linked to GPA and standardized achievement test scores.



Comparisons between the BEMI and the non-mentored Comparison group, observed only one significant difference on 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade Connecticut Statewide Mastery tests (CMT) before they entered the mentoring program. Here, the BEMI students' scored higher on 6<sup>th</sup> grade CMT Math. Nevertheless, the significant differences observed on 8<sup>th</sup> grade CMT Math and Reading test scores between the BEMI students and the Comparison peers remained significant after controlling for their performance differences on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade math CMT scores. The students who participated in the BEMI program had more positive and higher identification with academics scores, lower pre-encounter attitudes, and higher internalization scores than the comparison group. The Comparison group's steadily declining academic performance from 4<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade provides evidence of the academic disengagement process that occurs for some African American male youth (Osborne, 1999). This research begins to underscore how Afro-centric principles and mechanisms can be used to facilitate these young men's identification with their academic success.

In general, when compared to the BEMI group, the Comparison group expressed more ambivalent views about Whites and ambiguous feelings and anxieties about race. This difference was reflected by the Comparison group's higher scores on the pre-encounter scale. The results suggest that students in the Comparison group tended to be unclear about their ability to interface and be active participants in relationships outside of their immediate groups. The BEMI students, conversely, were able to express more positive views about the importance of an internalized racial identity status and its impact on their current levels of functioning. Fostering a positive racial identity may begin to dismantle the social barriers to academic success often experienced by African American young men.

Specific racial identity statuses were strong predictors of academic performance. This observation is consistent with Witherspoon and colleagues (1997) and Lockett and Harrell's (2003) findings and supports Osborne's (1999) claim that connecting one's self evaluation to their academic performance can help to explain academic achievement for adolescent African American male students. Although significant, our findings only observed a relationship between identification with academics and GPA. The association between identification with academics with GPA but not with the standardized tests may be due to the stigma associated with standardized tests, racial attitudes towards these tests, and the structural implications for students of color (Aronson & Steele, 2005).

## Limitations

While the findings provide evidence for the effectiveness of the BEMI program, it also elucidated the role that racial identity and identification with academics play in explaining academic achievement for African American boys. Although potentially significant, the results should be viewed with some caution. The first limitation of this study is how participants were selected into the mentoring and comparison group. There was no random assignment of subjects to condition (BEMI, Comparison). The BEMI participants may have had higher levels of academic motivation on entry into the mentoring. The BEMI group exhibited higher 6<sup>th</sup> grade math achievement scores. Since they were motivated, they were more likely to be receptive to the intervention. Second, the research design also impacted our ability to definitively assert which specific components of the intervention were most effective. Third, the study had a small sample size. This limited our ability to detect small effects. The beta weights were large however with the small sample we were unable to detect significant effects. Fourth, this study used the Helm and Parham's (1996) measure of racial identity which several scholars (Cokley, 2007; Vandiver et al., 2002) have critiqued for not having strong psychometric properties. Future studies examining effectiveness of an Afro-centric mentoring program that attempts to foster the academic achievement of young Black men should consider randomizing participants to minimize participant selection bias, potential motivational

differences, and academic performance prior to entry into the mentoring program. Clearly documenting all aspects of the BEMI mentoring program experiences may lend further understanding of the mechanisms present that fosters positive outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the Benjamin E. Mays Institute's mentoring program is promising because of its Afro-centric, school-based approach that builds on larger community supports and the school system of which the students are a part. Kunjufu (1985) has argued that one of the problems within the African American community is the view that their situations or problems are insurmountable, thus rendering students and parents paralyzed and unable to address them in systematic ways. The Benjamin E. Mays Institute's intervention challenges this assertion by creating an environment where young Black male students feel supported. It also appears to have an impact on their self concept as individuals of color.

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that the BEMI mentoring program appeared to impact the lives of the students who were a part of the program. The programs' focus on and use of culturally-centered modes of instruction and experiences impacted the development of the students' racial identity and reinforced their communities' commitment to them. This commitment appears to extend beyond them, as students, into their community. This reciprocal relationship draws attention to their role and their experiences within the community, and how this might positively impact African American attitudes toward education and academic success.

### Implications for Practice and Policy

- A significant contribution of this research is the role of an Afro-centric mentoring and successful male-role modeling on the academic achievement for African American young men. Exposure to and interactions with minority men who have achieved professional and personal success may help to open alternative educational opportunities and motivation for African American boys.
- Single sex instruction appears to enhance the academic performance and experience of African American boys. While additional research in this area is needed, policy makers need to consider how school contexts can reinforce, through single sex instruction, the importance of academic success for African American boys.
- Any intervention focused on African American boys should consider proactive steps that connect the young men's self identification with their academic success.
- Interventions that seek to tie self identification with academic success should also integrate strategies that reinforce these views at the peer, family, and community levels.
- Interventions focused on increasing the academic success of African American boys should also seek to tie these interventions to culturally grounded strategies that are borne from their ethnic/racial group.
- Creating a school context where the academic success of African American male students is not only expected but celebrated and integrated into any intervention developed to support students.
- Creating the school context also extends to the families that these young men come. Recognizing and proactively facilitating the parents' ability to negotiate larger educational structures through positive engagement can also help to reinforce messages and teaching of an intervention.
- From a cultural perspective, interventions need to consider and develop strategies that foster a sense of pride in African American young men, their culture, and the collective

unity they experience. This collective sense of unity may also enhance the young men's ability to re-enter their community and not separate their academic success from who they may need to be within that community context.

- Programs should also consider how it actively develops supports mechanisms for its participants that are consistently reinforced across the peer, school, home, and community settings.
- Programs should work to create contexts where African American young men learn skills that support them being able to mentor and support each other in their academic pursuits.
- Programs should also create opportunities to highlight and embrace the racial/cultural experiences of the students.
- Programs should be active in exploring with and understand from the perspective of African American young men, how they view their ethnic/cultural heritage impacting on their developing academic identity. This should then lead to interventions that are informed by their disclosures and involve their active participation in developing solutions to barriers encountered.
- Integrating Afro centric methodologies and pedagogy into the instruction of African American males may further enhance their ability to internalize and use the materials taught.
- There are some areas that should be considered that were not specifically examined in this research. They do however, build on other research and their applicability are logical:
  - Allow for some focus on bridging the academic gaps that present as African American young men transition from one educational setting to another (e.g., middle school to high school, etc.).
  - Create opportunities for African American boys to reenter systems they experienced as supportive as they negotiate new ones.

## Acknowledgments

This study was supported by the Benjamin E. Mays Institute at Lewis Fox Middle School and The Consultation Center, the Department of Psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine. Special thanks to Sadik Ali, Douglas McCrory, and Barbara Maben. This paper is a doctoral dissertation completed by the primary author. Portions of this paper were presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference on Community Research and Action.

## References

- Akbar, N. Paradigms of African-American research. In: Jones, R., editor. *Black Psychology*. Berkeley, CA: Cobb and Henry Publication; 1991. p. 709-725.
- Aronson, J.; Steele, CM. Stereotypes and the Fragility of Academic Competence, Motivation, and Self-Concept. In: Elliot, AJ.; Dweck, CS., editors. *Handbook of competence and motivation*. New York, NY, US: Guilford Publications; 2005. p. 436-456.
- Asante, MK. *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; 1998.
- Awad GH. The role of racial identity, academic self-concept, and self-esteem in the prediction of academic outcomes for African American students. *Journal of Black Psychology* 2007;33:188–207.
- Baker, DB.; Maguire, CP. Mentoring in historical perspective. In: DuBois, DL.; Karcher, MJ., editors. *Handbook of youth mentoring*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2005. p. 14-29.
- Berk, LE. *Child development*. 7. Boston: Pearson; 2006.

- Bowman P, Howard C. Race related socialization, motivation, and academic achievement: A study of Black youths in three-generation families. *Journal of American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 1985;24:134–141.
- Cohen, NH.; Galbraith, MW. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 1995. Mentoring: New Strategies and Challenges; p. 66
- Cokley KO. Critical issues in measurement of ethnic and racial identity: A referendum on the state of the field. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 2007;54:224–234.
- Cokley KO. What do we really know about the academic motivation of African American college students? Challenging the “anti-intellectual” myth. *Harvard Educational Review* 2003;96:608–630.
- Cross, WE, Jr. *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; 1991.
- Cross, WE., Jr; Parham, TA.; Helms, JE. Nigrescence revisited: Theory and research. In: Jones, RL., editor. *Advances in Black Psychology*. Oakland, CA: Cobb & Henry; 1996.
- Datnow A, Cooper R. Peer networks of African American students in independent schools: affirming academic success and racial identity. *Journal of Negro Education* 1998;66:56–72.
- DuBois DL, Rhodes JE. Youth mentoring: Bridging science with practice. *Journal of Community Psychology* 2006;34:547–565.
- Erikson, E. *Identity: Youth in crisis*. New York: Norton; 1968.
- Griffin K, Allen W. Mo’ money mo’ problems? High-achieving Black high school students’ experience with resources, racial climate, and resilience. *Journal of Negro Education* 2001;75:478–494.
- Harper BE. The relationship between Black racial identity and academic achievement in urban settings. *Theory into Practice* 2007;46:230–238.
- Harris F. Centricity and the mentoring experience in academia: An Africentric mentoring program. *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 1999;23:229–234.
- Helms, JE. An update of Helms’s White and People of Color racial identity models. In: Ponterotto, JG.; Casas, JM.; Suzuki, LA.; Alexander, CM., editors. *Handbook of multicultural counseling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1995. p. 181-198.
- Helms, JE.; Parham, TA. Racial Identity Attitudes Scale. In: Jones, RL., editor. *Handbook of test and measurements*. Richmond, CA: Cobb and Henry; 1996.
- Kambon, KKK. *African/Black psychology in the American context: An African-centered approach*. Tallahassee, FL: Nubian Nations; 1998.
- Kunjufu, J. *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. Jawanza Kunjufu; 1985. Rev. ed
- Loo CM, Rolison G. Alienation of ethnic minority students at a predominantly white university. *Journal of Higher Education* 1986;57:58–78.
- Lockett CT, Harrell JP. Racial identity, self-esteem, and academic achievement: Too much interpretation, too little supporting data. *Journal of Black Psychology* 2003;29:325–336.
- Maldonado D Jr. Ethnic self-identity and self understanding. *Social Casework* 1975;56:618–622.
- Nobles, W. African philosophy: Foundation of Black psychology. In: Jones, R., editor. *Black psychology*. Berkeley, CA: Cobb & Henry; 1991. p. 47-64.
- Ogbu, JU. Understanding the school performance of urban African Americans: Some essential background knowledge. In: Walberg, H.; Reyes, O.; Weissberg, R., editors. *Children and youth: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. London: Sage; 1997. p. 190-222.
- Ogbu, JU. *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; 2003.
- Osborne JW. Academics, self-esteem, and race: A look at the underlying assumptions of the disidentification hypothesis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 1995;21:449–455.
- Osborne JW. Identification with academics and academic success among community college students. *Community College Review* 1997;25:59–67.
- Osborne JW. Unraveling underachievement among African American boys from identification with academic perspective. *The Journal of Negro Education* 1999;68:555–565.
- Rhodes. *A Critical View of Youth Mentoring: New Directions for Youth Development*. In: Rhodes, JE., editor. *A Critical View of Youth Mentoring: New Directions for Youth Development*. New York: Jossey-Bass; 2002.

- Royse D. Mentoring high risk minority youth: Evaluation of the Brothers Project. *Adolescence* 1998;36:145–159. [PubMed: 9583667]
- Tajfel, H. *The social psychology of minorities*. New York: Minority Rights Group; 1978.
- Sellers R, Chavous TM, Cooke DY. Racial ideology and racial centrality as predictors of African American college students' academic performance. *Journal of Black Psychology* 1998;24:8–27.
- Steele CM. Race and the schooling of Black Americans. *The Atlantic Monthly* 1992;269:68–78.
- Steele CM, Aronson J. Stereotypes threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1995;69:797–811. [PubMed: 7473032]
- Utsey SO, Hoard A, Williams O. Therapeutic group mentoring with African American male adolescents. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 2003;25:126–139.
- Vandiver BJ, Cross WE Jr, Worrell FC, Fhagen-Smith PE. Validating the Cross Racial Identity Scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 2002;49:71–85.
- Voelkl KE. Measuring students' identification with school. *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 1996;56:760–770.
- Ward, JV. Racial identify formation and transformation. In: Gilligan, C.; Lyons, ND.; Hammer, TJ., editors. *Making connections: The relational worlds and adolescent girls at Emma Willard School*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1990.
- Witherspoon KM, Speight SL, Thomas AJ. Racial identity attitudes, school achievement, and academic self-efficacy among African American high school students. *Journal of Black Psychology* 1997;23:344–357.

**Table 1**

Means and standard deviations of BEMI and Comparison group on achievement outcomes, identification with academics and racial identity attitudes

Variable	BEMI	Comparison
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade GPA	2.89 (.50)***	1.06 (.57)***
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade CMT Math	122.46 (23.26)***	94.26 (26.23)***
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade CMT Reading	43.78 (9.9)	39.39 (9.54)
Identification with Academics	43.19 (5.87)*	39.64 (6.13)*
Preencounter	2.32 (.46)***	2.86 (.68)***
Encounter	3.56 (.44)	3.37 (.71)
Immersion/emersion	2.91 (.62)	3.20 (.56)
Internalization	3.93 (.56)*	3.65 (.51)*
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade CMT Math	103.53 (20.97)**	80.13 (18.76)**
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade CMT Reading	52.00 (6.37)	48.73 (6.37)
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade CMT Math	82.13 (17.14)	80.78 (15.57)
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade CMT Reading	37.00 (7.37)	35.11 (5.44)

\*  $p < .05$ ,

\*\*  $p < .01$ ,

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

CMT = Connecticut Statewide Mastery Test.

**Table 2**  
Multiple regression analysis predicting 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA, CMT Math and Reading Achievement

Variable	8 <sup>th</sup> GPA		8 <sup>th</sup> CMT Math		8 <sup>th</sup> CMT Read	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
IA	.30	2.50*	.20	1.57	.00	.05
Preencounter	-.25	-1.90	-.17	-1.28	-.14	-1.03
Encounter	.15	1.22	.05	.42	.08	.60
Immersion/emersion	-.17	-1.23	-.27	-1.86	-.37	-2.40*
Internalization	.24	1.97*	.31	2.50*	.27	2.03*
R <sup>2</sup>	34%		32%		26%	

\*  $p < .05$ .

IA = Identification with Academics.