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African-American Male Identities in Adult Basic Education and Literacy Programs [Theorizing from the Literature]

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***Abstract:** This paper proposes that the relationship between literacy and identity holds potential for illuminating African-American men's participation in ABEL programs and providing opportunities for learning.*

Literacy and identity mutually constitute each other (Collins & Blot, 2003; Gee, 2008) and are therefore influential factors in adult literacy program participation (Rogers, 2004; Sheared, 1999), yet this relationship is under-explored in adult basic education and literacy (ABEL) theory and practice. Few studies have explored the literate experiences of African American men in ABEL although 45% of African-American males drop out of high school (Greene, 2001) and are therefore likely candidates for ABEL programs. The high dropout rates in high school and ABEL programs indicate a disconnection between the needs of African American males and programmatic approaches. Considering that a key tenet of adult learning is the incorporation of learner experiences as resources for learning, I argue that the literate experiences of African American males hold potential not only for expounding their engagement with literacy but providing opportunities for learning. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between literacy and identity and the potential this relationship holds for illuminating African American men's participation in ABEL programs.

Most of the research on literacy and identity focuses on adolescents (Ferguson, 2000; Price, 2000) and women (Belzer, 2004; Mahiri & Godley, 1998). Extant research demonstrates that identities are shaped by the discourses in which they are positioned and the experiences that affirm or negate those identities (Ferguson, 2000; Luttrell, 1996). Historically, African American men have struggled against the detrimental effects of negative stereotyping and cultural devaluation in society and the school system. Those who do not complete high school must also counter prevalent deficit views that associate low literacy with poverty, poor motivation, limited intelligence and laziness. Research indicates that adult learners acquire literacy as a means of negating, confirming or transitioning towards particular identities (Denny, 1992; Mahiri & Godley, 1998) and approach literacy through a cultural lens that informs their aspirations and expectations (Bartlett, 2008; Gadsen, 1993). Accordingly, the vestiges of racism and cultural differences indicate that the experiences of African American males cannot be subsumed under the canopy of privilege associated with White males. In addition, early school experiences not only influence adults' willingness to participate in ABEL programs (Quigley, 1992) but also create a filter through which they engage with classroom practices (Belzer, 2004). Therefore, understanding African American men's daily lived experiences is crucial to providing opportunities for learning (Rogers & Fuller, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is anchored in New Literacies Studies (NLS) and a constructivist view of identity. New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003) is a body of scholarship that promotes a social practices view of literacy in contrast to a functional perspective that defines literacy as a decontextualized skill. NLS scholars posit that values and identity are intimately

involved in learning and literacy. In essence, literacy is not just reading and writing but “values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships including peoples’ awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy, discourses of literacy and how people talk about and make sense of literacy” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). This perspective allows for the exploration of attendant meanings, ideologies and power relations that inform individual experiences with literacy.

African American men in ABEL

Quigley (1992) rightly points out that adult learners’ educational biography have been overlooked in adult education research. The few empirical studies (Denny, 1992; Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001; Quigley, 1992) that have addressed African-American men’s experience in ABEL to some degree have focused on the reasons for participation or the lack thereof. In Quigley’s (1992) study of low-literate adults in Pittsburgh, he found participants made a conscious decision not to attend ABEL programs because of negative schooling experiences, yet firmly believed in their children’s need to acquire an education. Denny (1992) corroborated Quigley’s findings in a New York based focus group of current and prospective students. He found that negative school experiences inhibited participation. In addition, respondents believed that literacy did not provide comparable benefits to the White population. These two factors and a sense of shame held greater resonance with males as barriers to participating in ABEL programs.

More recently, Rogers (2004) has shown that the deficit literate identities of adults formed in early schooling experiences transferred to adult basic education settings. In contrast, the same participants exhibited confidence, adequacy and agency in using literacy skills in work, home and community domains. Subsequently, Rogers & Fuller (2007) demonstrated that helping students produce counter narratives to the deficit construction of their literate identities can produce a shift in ‘chains of meaning’ (p.96) that promote success in ABEL. These studies convey that literacy as a practice and process shapes identities, informs beliefs and values and thereby action. Hence, adult educators must be aware of African-American men’s ‘histories of participation’ in order to provide opportunities for learning.

Although African-American men are represented in these studies, they account for less than 50% of each sample. General population studies often obscure diversity of experience and, in this case, the combined impact of race, class and gender on the perceptions and experiences of African-American men in ABEL have not been considered. In addition, participants in these studies consistently refer to negative schooling experiences which aligns with dislike for school in general participation research. However, failure to investigate these early schooling experiences limit adult educators’ understanding of the socio-historical factors that inform how African-American men engage with literacy and ABEL programs thereby unintentionally promoting deficit discourses.

Literacy, Identity and African-American Males

The experiences of African American males in the United States cannot be subsumed under the canopy of privilege associated with White males. If we are to understand the relationship between African American men and literacy, we must attend to the following issues: (1) the unique construction of a pathologized African American male identity in the public

sphere and the school system (Jackson II, 2006; Tatum, 2006); (2) the adoption of a socio-historical framework that takes into consideration the legacy of slavery and racism (Jackson II, 2006; Peterson, 1996); and (3) the intimate connection between race, class, and gender (Cuyjet, 2006; Price, 2000).

African American males are stereotyped as lazy, unintelligent and violent and subjected to an “at risk” discourse that places them on a path for various destructive trajectories (Ferguson, 2000; Jackson II, 2006). This pathological characterization of African-American males in society and the school system adversely informs student-teacher relationships and school policies, resulting in a disproportionate occurrence of detentions, suspensions and special education assignments (Ferguson, 2000). Furthermore, the lack of a culturally relevant pedagogy promotes disaffection with schooling through its devaluation and disregard for African American culture and experiences (Tatum, 2006). In response, students adopt adaptive and protective behaviors as counteractive measures against attacks on their identity (Fordham, 1996). Recognizing that there are other factors that contribute to early school leaving, many of the adolescents with protective or oppositional behaviors reject the school system and eventually drop out. Those who return to pursue their education bring their academic biography into the ABEL setting. Hence, the call for a culturally relevant pedagogy (Guy, 1999; Sheard, 1999) must be accompanied by an understanding of oppositional behaviors (Giroux, 1983) associated with cultural negotiation.

Resistance to the school system has contributed to perceptions that African Americans do not value education although studies to the contrary exist (Brandt, 2001; Gadsen, 1993). In a longitudinal study of 25 African Americans spanning four generations, Gadsden found that while they valued literacy as an individual and community possession, they also framed it within the context of the African American experience. Literacy and education in general were viewed based upon the benefits they conferred. Therefore, African Americans engagement with literacy is not simply an issue of devaluing education as deficit perspectives would imply but rather one of aspirations and expectations (Gould, 1999) or what Sparks (2000) refers to as the conflict between ‘official consciousness’ and ‘practical consciousness’. The former is based on an abstract view of hopes and dreams while the latter is based upon the knowledge of lived experience in the light of limited access, resources, and benefits. The socio-historical relationship between African Americans and literacy has been fraught with the ongoing struggle for equal education and comparable benefits of education.

The socio-historical nature of race relations in the United States and cultural differences indicate that African-American men’s experiences cannot be captured under White male generalizations (Hunter & Davis, 1994). The hegemonic conception of masculinity is framed around employment and being a good provider (Hunter & Davis, 1994) yet the persistent promulgation of negative stereotyping in the larger social consciousness and the limited employment opportunities hamper African American men’s ability to fulfill the dominant view of masculinity. In addition, Euro-American culture promotes individualism and linear thinking in contrast to the communal values of African Americans (Flannery, 1994). Jackson II (2006) points out that struggle characterize African-American men’s identities and that a key component of their masculinity is maintaining the integrity of cultural identity in a society that is hostile to its manifestations.

Hunter and Davis’ (1994) found African American men’s perceptions of manhood and masculinity varied by age and class and that masculinity, spirituality and measures of financial security registered a higher salience among the working class. Other studies echo the importance of spirituality as a source of self definition and coping strategy for navigating society (Mosley-

Howard & Evans, 2000) and the variance of perceptions by class (Price, 2000). The majority of studies on African-American men in educational settings beyond high school are university students. However, the majority of ABEL learners did not finish high school and are among the poor. How are the identities of African-American men constructed in ABEL? What identities do African American men use literacy to help them enact and do the policies and practices of ABEL support or detract from those goals? Considering that many of the policies and practices of ABEL are underpinned by the culture of poverty theory, adult educators are positioned to be unaware or ignore the structural factors that frame their response to ABEL programs (Prins & Schafft, 2007).

In sum, African American men's engagement with literacy and the purposes for which they acquire it is informed by the combined lived experience of race, class and gender. Their experiences call for a recognized distinction between literacy and learning in that their responses are in opposition to a system of literacy practices that alienates them from a sense of self as opposed to resistance to learning. Furthermore, the daily reality of the limited resources available to them weigh heavily upon the desires and goals associated with literacy. Therefore, understanding the relationship between literacy and identity holds the potential for generating more nuanced pedagogical and curricular approaches that will increase and sustain the participation of African American males, thereby enhancing the knowledge base for reaching a diverse population.

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