Boys of Color
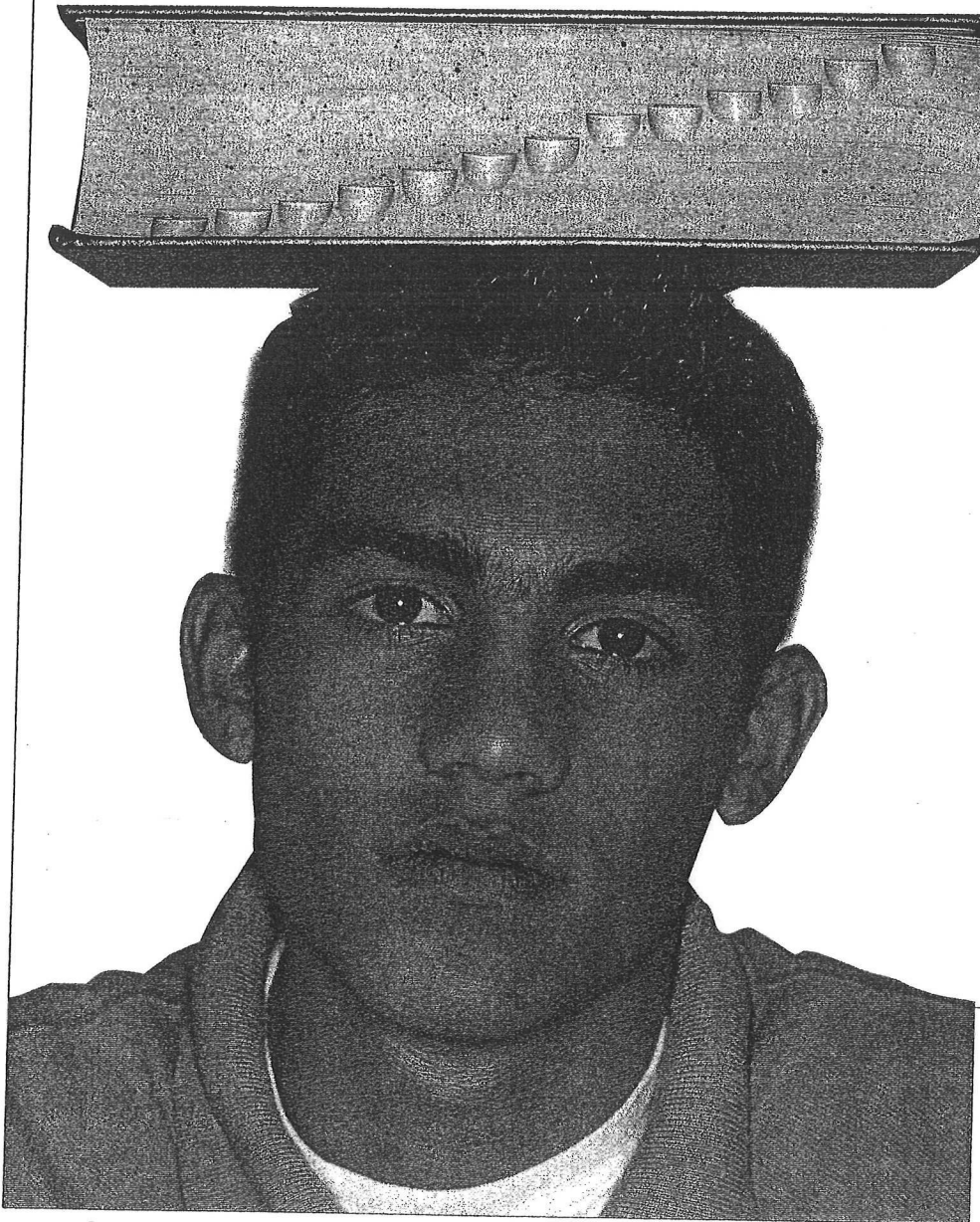
and Academic Achievement

Mr. James, a seventh grade math teacher at PS 45 middle school in Colorado, begins his 2nd period class by reciting the classroom mission: "If we are to be somebody someday our journey begins with the belief that an education is not a right it is a privilege which must be earned everyday through hard work."

by Oscar Joseph, Ph.D.

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Mr. James, a mountainous figure at six foot four whose stature resembles a former professional football player, says that every child must have a life mission — so why not begin with one in school? His students marvel at that, especially the boys.

Mr. James has predominately African American and Hispanic boys in his 2nd period math class. One of his students, Leon is a struggling C student who attends school with his older brother Ronnie who is in eighth grade. Leon lives with his aunt Trudy and his uncle Frank. He lost his father last year and says that his biological mother does not have a significant role in his life. Leon wants to go to college one day and become a math teacher like Mr. James so he can return to his neighborhood and teach mathematics to the children who live there.

However, this equation may not add up because children of color are not doing well academically in Colorado. In the fall of 2003, 120,717 African American and Hispanic boys were enrolled in Colorado schools (Colorado Department of Education, 2003). According to the 2003 statewide CSAP exam results in 7th grade Mathematics, only 18% of African American and Hispanic students were proficient and above.

The academic disparities that exist within our schools are historically, politically, and systemically created. Davis (2003) in his work, Early Schooling and Academic Achievement of African American Males, contends that males of color in public schools are placed at risk for negative consequences such as school failure, special education assignments and suspensions. Noguera (2003) in his work, The Trouble With Black Boys, suggests that the hurdles which impede the academic success for males of color are issues centered on youth culture and male identity development. The overall bureaucracies, crowed classrooms and lack of resources in schools seem to overshadow the intricate human development needs of boys of color.

Politically based reform agendas, district mandates and systemic policies often fall short of the daily social and emotional wants of our children.

Males of color need safe, caring and communal learning environments that confirm their culture and celebrate their diversity. The public school classroom is a place of interpersonal development where males of color seek respect and acceptance from their peers. The culture of schooling becomes the potter's wheel that shapes a male's identity. Further, the classroom setting can nurture a male of color's attitude regarding the importance of academic effort and achievement.

In order to uncover a thoughtful understanding of the academic challenges facing students of color, their voices must be a part of the discourse. We must bring voice to the voiceless and listen to the populace that is directly affected to answer the question: How can we close the achievement gap for all students, more specifically for boys of color in Colorado? We will explore the six research-based academic principals and recommendations designed to close the achievement gap for boys of color: 1) Ethos of Peer Influence, 2) Culture and Schooling, 3) Motivation, 4) Instructor Perception, Expectations and Behavior, 5) Access and Encouragement to Enroll in Advanced Placement courses, and 6) Parental Strategies.

Ethos of Peer Influence

According to McMillan and Reed (1994) in *Resilient At Risk Students: Student Views About Why They Succeed*, peer networks of resilient students play an important role in determining academic success. Resilient students devise peer groups to motivate each other and to provide support regarding school and non-school areas. A resilient school culture provides variables of organizational strategic planning, high expectations, positive work ethic, and clear academic goals. Boys of color need affiliations with social groups that confirm their values, thoughts, dreams, chal-

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Culture and Schooling

Generally, the academic achievement gap has been characterized by genetics, poverty, family background and income. These constructs can no longer be seen as legitimate reasons why students of color are unable to achieve, particularly when there are countless stories of those who suffered extreme life hardships and yet found academic success. Alternative theories will focus on artifacts of cultural differences and the way students of color respond to various classroom experiences. The culture, traditions, heritage and historical experiences of a student can provide insight related to how he understands his world and the style to which he learns.

Boys of color enter the schooling process with a rich ethnic history where their social values are culturally constructed. Schools must find ways to embrace and create authentic connections with the lives of these boys in order to nurture their academic potential. In short, boys of color need role models that will help shape their male identity. They need schools that are built on a humane educational philosophy were every student can see themselves in the curriculum and know that they have a valued role as a part of the overall school culture.

Motivation

In their work, *Direct and Indirect Effects of School Learning Variables On The Academic Achievement Of African American 10th Graders,* Adams and Singh (1998) report that students of color must establish an early history of academic success. This early success will motivate a student to sustain a high academic achievement standard throughout their school career.

Boys of color need opportunities to practice their academic skills by being exposed to a challenging learning environment, that acknowledge their schooling possibilities and academic growth. Early success is crucial, as a history of failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that will result in under-achievement. When a teacher enters the classroom, he or she must create a sense of belonging and relevance for boys of color. They must establish through inspired gestures and genuine presence an interconnectedness of why we are all engaged in the activity of leaning.

High School Graduation Rates in Colorado:

All female students:	73%
All male students:	65%
Black female students:	56%
Black male students:	34%
Hispanic female students:	52%
Hispanic male students:	41%

Source: The Urban Institute's Education Policy Center

Instructor Perception, Expectations and Behavior

The teacher sets the academic tone and climate of learning within the classroom. It is the teacher who brings hope when there is hopelessness and healing when young dreams are broken. A caring teacher mends the troubled souls and strained hearts of his or her children who need someone to encourage them. As teachers we educate, but we also must nurture and cultivate the next generation to lead, with the intent to change a world that must be governed with peace. In order to ensure this agenda, teachers must examine their "teacher self" and critically deconstruct one's personal biases, prejudices and false understandings regarding issues of diversity as it relates to boys of color. Teachers must develop skills of cultural competence, community engagement and relationship building to create appropriate, obtainable academic expectations for all children.

Access and Encouragement to Enroll in Advanced Placement Courses

If African American and Hispanic boys are going to reach their full academic potential they must receive access to rigorous academic programs early in their schooling life. Noguera and Akom (2000) in their article, *The Opportunity Gap*, found that students of color are more likely to be excluded from classes for those deemed gifted in primary school, and from honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school. Without consistent access to high-level classes boys of color will be denied the opportunity to pursue any post-secondary options, which may hinder their future economic stability and overall quality of life. Therefore, males of color must receive individual support that provides consistent mentoring, modeling and self-discipline.

Parental Strategies

According to Phillips and Jencks (1998) in their work, *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, parenting practices have the most profound impact on a student's academic performance rather than movement in a parent's educational attainment or income. Primarily it is how the parent organizes the home, structures study time and monitors video games, phone calls and television watching after school. If the student needs academic tutoring, then arrangements are made in advance for assistance with structured homework review every evening. On the weekends the child is encouraged to schedule study time in the local community library.

Boys of color, like most children, need a consistent study routine, a clean place to work, academic resources and sincere levels of efficacy from family that confirms high academic performance. Boys of color and all boys must be given developmental opportunities outside of school to establish a record of academic success rather then social disconnection, isolation and failure.

Strategies for Closing the Gender Gap

Closing the gender academic achievement gap is certainly a complex and challenging undertaking that will require long-term and systemic planning. However, there are several ideas that could make an immediate and long-term impact on academic growth among male students:

- Hands-on instructional classrooms
- Male-only after school study groups
- Boys-to-Men mentor programs
- Biographies of Successful Men of Color
- Visitation with Men of Color in Leadership
- Male-only service learning projects
- Male Responsibility Programs
- Character Building Male Discussion Groups

The objective is to give male students an opportunity to receive individualized instruction, after school gender specific programs, and role models that represent possible futures. Boys of color must engage with other males to form their identity, visit with men who are successful, serve their communities and join organizations that meet their developmental needs.

Conclusion

If boys of color are to become "somebody" and embrace the belief that an education is not a right but a privilege that is earned through hard work, our mission then is to critically examine how peer influence, culture, history of academic success, teacher expectations, academic access and family life increases school achievement. The need for thoughtful inclusive curriculum, culturally relevant school policies and faculty development strategies that are student centered is our charge for change. Where should we begin? Perhaps, we begin with seeing the child first, truly knowing him well. We all must take a caring look beyond the report cards, quantitative scores or economic conditions and try to understand our student's dreams, fears, celebrations and struggles. This is where we should commit our efforts—an interconnected place where we teach the child of color how to thrive.