Helping African American Males Reach Their Academic Potential

Marlene Carter

At 8:00 A.M. the bell rings and my AP English literature class begins. Four young men, all African American, sit at the front, ready to lead the discussion of chapter 16 of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). I sense something different in the room, an anticipation that was not here yesterday when the previous group led the chapter 15 discussion. This group of students is, by their choice, all male. I am hoping that their discussion will be as thorough and insightful as that led by the co-ed group the day before.

Kevin writes the chapter number and the names of the group members on the board. He sports an Afro and wears the fashion of the day, an oversized athletic jersey, sagging jeans, and name-brand tennis shoes. Next to him is Randy, a tall, lean, built-for-basketball type. His hair is freshly braided. He wears an oversized T-shirt and sagging shorts. To Randy’s right is Joseph, who has been quite distracted recently by a combination of needing to make decisions about college and having fallen in love with an AP English student in another class. (They will get married at the end of their freshman year at UCLA.) The last student, Stanley, sits quietly, turning through the pages of his book. He smiles a lot, but seldom speaks. He is a modest young man; I later learn from his friends that he has earned a football scholarship to a major university.

I introduce the group, then settle down to become part of the class as the young men assume control of the classroom. As the conversation heats up, I hear . . .
Kevin: So we agree this prize fighter is symbolic of Invisible Man. IM says he was “blinded by the light."

Elaine: I disagree. When Invisible Man was in the ring he was able to see.

Jared: IM is being blinded by the underlying meaning of the
Brotherhood like the boxer is blinded by boxing, and IM is . . .

Kevin: They talk a lot about light and darkness, blindness, and sight.
Eric: When he approaches the stage he is blinded (refers to page 338)—

Kevin: I have a question. If light represents truth, how is he blinded by light?

(Three girls respond simultaneously. Finally, a male voice emerges.)

Jared: I think this light goes back to the boxer in the ring. There is a lot of parallelism.

We have come a long way together to get to this day. I had struggled for years to get more African American males into my AP class. The young men had fought stereotypes and low expectations from some teachers, a rigid educational system that does not cater to the needs or learning styles of young men, and gatekeepers who would exclude them from opportunities to learn. I had worked hard over the past 3 years to prepare more African American males for AP classes and, more than that, to see that they were successful in those classes.

Four years earlier, my AP class of 23 included only 3 boys. I made a commitment to nurture the ninth-grade boys I had that year and encourage them to take AP. When the young men became seniors, I was pleased to have 11 boys in a class of 27, but most of them were content to do mediocre work, doing just enough to get by. This year my class of 23 AP students included 6 African American males. Five of them consistently demonstrated the ability to excel in the course.

As documented in this chapter, my concern about African American male achievement led me to conduct a 2-year teacher-research study as a K–12 scholar with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. I began my study with the following question: What curriculum, strategies, and attitudes best help African American males to be successful in advanced placement English and college? During the first year I focused on the factors that may have caused most of the young men in my senior AP English literature class to underperform. During the second year, I looked at factors that may have led the young men in my senior AP English class the following year to be so successful.
LIVING AND LEARNING IN LOS ANGELES

I teach in a neighborhood situated between the glitz of Hollywood and the harshness of what has come to be known as South Los Angeles. Located in southwest Los Angeles, this urban high school is surrounded by a stable neighborhood of working- and middle-class families, on one side; a prosperous upper-middle-class area, in the nearby hills; and several blocks of low-income apartment complexes, adjacent to the school. The families in the hills rarely send their children down to our high school. They have been scared away by the school’s low test scores and the gang violence that plagues the surrounding community, sometimes spilling over onto the campus. At the time of the study there were slightly more than 2,000 students enrolled in the school, of whom about 65% were African American and 34% Latino.

I am a graduate of this school and have lived in the community continuously since sixth grade. My passion for finding answers to my questions about improving education for African American male students grew out of decades of watching young men, first my classmates, then my students, and later my own son, struggle in a school system that did not meet their needs. I have heard the regret in the voices of 40-year-old men who say they wish they had done better in school; they struggle to make a living on jobs barely above minimum wage. I hear the sadness when I talk each year with young men in their senior year who realize their options are limited because of their academic performance during the previous 3 years. They sometimes sign up for community college, but more often go straight to work in low-paying jobs. I agonize with my son, now a student at my alma mater, as he complains, frustrated, that he is bored with school. These complaints began in fourth grade and have intensified every year.

These issues took on even greater importance for me as I encountered other parents and teachers who shared my frustration. I talked about it with two friends who are also teachers and mothers of African American sons. We discussed the research we had read on how school systems do not meet the needs of African American males. We also shared stories of how most teachers seemed to misunderstand our sons, how disappointed we are in the system, and how we would like to see the system change. As we talked, I felt that I had to be part of that change. Since young men were not succeeding in my class, I needed to make some changes in my curriculum, strategies, and attitudes in order to be a more effective teacher. In addition, I knew that I was not the only one who had to do some changing. I wondered how I could help my students (and my own son) take
more of an interest in their academic education and have a more positive attitude toward learning. I pressed forward by developing a study to look specifically at the factors that might be influencing the performance of my African American male students and others like them.

WHY SOME AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES UNDERPERFORM IN SCHOOL

As I began my research, I listed possible reasons why the young men were not reaching their academic potential. I wondered if curriculum, teaching strategies, teacher attitudes, student attitudes, or a combination of these could be responsible for the achievement gap. If this were the case, I decided, I would make changes in my teaching style, offering the students more choice in reading material, essay topics, and class activities.

In November I had the opportunity to share my study as a work in progress at a session of the National Writing Project Urban Sites Network Conference. This session was valuable in helping me to expand my thinking and become open to other possible factors. A group of about 50 teachers, composed mainly of Writing Project fellows from urban cities across the United States, collaborated with me to compile a list of factors that may affect African American male achievement. I later grouped the responses into categories.

**Home Environment**
- Lack of encouragement at home
- Lack of spiritual foundation in home/school
- Absence of male role models at home

**Role Models**
- Too much emphasis on sports and entertainment figures
- Lack of alternative role models
- Lack of Black male teachers
- Positive media portrayal of thugs

**Teacher Attitudes**
- Lack of cultural sensitivity
- Overstressed teachers who have no time for caring
- Perception of Black males as hostile
- Image of African American males as tough and rough
**Student Attitudes**
Not cool to be “geek”
Don’t see benefits of academic success
Anger over powerlessness
Achieving is “acting White”
Acculturation—feeling like they have to give up something
Don’t relate to female instructors
Influenced by peer groups
Image in school is that African American males are tough and rough
Lack of proper motivation

**Curriculum**
Literacy curriculum excludes texts males find interesting
Lack of awareness of literary heritage
What’s offered doesn’t support emerging identity of what is a man

**Teaching Strategies**
Teaching strategies and methodology don’t support active learning

**Miscellaneous**
More hyperactive (K–1)
Break a cycle of gangs within family structure
Alienation and rejection from dominant culture

I reviewed the literature on African American learning and achievement. The College Board’s *Reaching the Top: Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement* (1999) identifies several factors that influence achievement:

1. **Economic circumstances**: “A high concentration of poor youngsters in schools is associated with lower achievement for poor and nonpoor students alike. . . . These schools do not have sufficient resources to meet student needs and these schools have high student mobility” (p. 14).

2. **Education of Parents**: “Students from low-income homes, or who have parents with little formal education, are much more likely to be low achievers and much less likely to be high achievers than students from high-income families or who have parents with bachelors or advanced degrees” (pp. 8–9).

3. **Racial and Ethnic Prejudice and Discrimination**: “A sufficient
number of whites still harbor doubts about the educational potential of some minority groups for these views to continue to take a toll on the academic performance of many minority students” (p. 16).

Jawanza Kunjufu, an educational consultant, attributes the high African American male high school dropout rate to factors that include “our children being bored, lack of finances, lack of rewarding experiences in school, lack of positive adult reinforcement, and concern for gangs and safety.”

In Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement among African American Students coauthor Theresa Perry states: “In order for African-American children to achieve in school they have to be able to negotiate three distinct social identities: their identity as members of a castelike group, their identity as members of mainstream society, and their identity as members of a cultural group in opposition to which whiteness historically and contemporarily continues to be defined” (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003)

Using this information, I began to explore factors that did or did not affect my students. I used a combination of written surveys, classroom observations, and student work to find out more about the skills, attitudes, and lives of the 11 young men in my senior AP English class.

YEAR 1: JUST GETTING BY

Are you presently performing at your academic potential?

Nope. I’m lazy.

No, I actually slacked off a lot, but I was able to bring it back up.

No. I am slacking off because I am tired of school.

No, there is a lot of improvement needed.

No, because I haven’t begun to fight.

The students who responded to the survey question above were African American males who, by their own admission, were not doing as well academically as they could. Surprisingly, these seniors were not struggling in remedial classes, happy to just get their high school diplomas. They were students who had elected to take advanced-placement English. In June, when the survey was given, all the young men had been accepted into 4-year universities and would start college in 3 months. The survey con-
firmed what I had determined from their essays, tests, and projects during Year 1 of my study—they were not doing their best academically.

As I shared my study with other teachers, I could see that some did not understand my concern. They congratulated me for having 11 young Black men in my AP class. They were aware that most high schools, urban or suburban, public or private, have surprisingly few African American males in the higher level classes. At one high-performing high school in Los Angeles, for example, an AP English teacher reported that there were no African American males in any of the AP English classes. But I had come to realize that getting the young men into the AP class was only half the battle. The young men, with one exception, lacked the motivation and drive of their female counterparts. The young men were less likely to complete the reading, to write multiple drafts of a paper, and to engage in deep conversations about the literature. Most of them did just enough to get by.

I began reviewing the data I had collected thus far: student surveys, student writing, and teacher observation. Using that data, I would try to rule out factors that did not appear to affect my students. I do not mean to suggest that such factors do not inhibit students in other classrooms from excelling. However, I determined that it was essential to focus only on factors that might be the cause of underperformance for my students.

**Factor 1: African American Males Do Not Achieve Because Their Parents Are Not Involved in Their Education**

This factor did not affect my students. Nine of the 10 African American males in my AP English class had a parent who attended at least one school meeting to conference with teachers. (The 10th student had an adult cousin who made several contacts with me.) Two students had parents who were very active in parent groups in the school. Whenever a student received a grade of less than C on a progress report, parents initiated contact with me about their child’s progress. One pair of parents asked for weekly updates even though their son received satisfactory grades on all the school-generated progress reports.

Parental involvement went beyond policing grades. One student told me that when he was having a hard time reading *Hamlet* his father read through act III with him. At graduation a mother approached me to say that she was dissatisfied with the final project her son’s group had submitted. (She had taken the time to read a 30-page magazine project.) I recalled that another young man had been in my ninth-grade English class. On a
survey that I sent home to all parents, his mother noted that she felt her son was underchallenged in his classes. Her comment caused me to review his school records and recommend to his counselor that he be moved to honors classes. These parents are involved and for the most part aware of what is needed for their children to succeed in high school.

The cause of the underachievement, I believed, did not lie in the parents. I did not feel that these parents needed special “training,” as is given in the classes being offered in many urban schools these days. The assumption in these classes is that parents are not educated and don’t understand or are intimidated by the educational system. The parents of my students had no trouble communicating with (and in some cases making demands of) the school. My parents understood the educational system, but they were as puzzled as I was about why their sons were not achieving.

**Factor 2: African American Males Do Not Succeed Because They Do Not Have Male Role Models in the Home**

I met the fathers of 5 of these 10 students. All the fathers were employed. All showed through their conversation with me and with their sons that they valued education and expected their sons to achieve in school. All the sons showed respect for their fathers. The fathers of the other 5 did not attend any school events. The boys’ mothers, however, were fine role models who showed that they valued education. One was a journalist; another was a businesswoman who had to travel for her job; another was a realtor. The students with fathers in the home did not do significantly better than students who did not live with their fathers.

**Factor 3: Teachers Are Not Culturally Sensitive to African American Males**

Some educators suggested that African American males were alienated by the dominant culture. But in the safe cocoon of our high school, where African Americans constitute the majority of the student population, the faculty, and the administrative staff, students did not report feeling such alienation. Instead, they were confident in their abilities. On the survey, they rated themselves as above-average students, despite the C grades they earned in my class. They saw that in comparison to all other students, they were above average. Their confidence also grew out of their affiliation with sports. As varsity players and college-bound students, they had status in the eyes of their peers and their teachers.
I believe that there are teachers who are not culturally sensitive to African American males. These teachers often lack experience with males from this culture and base their beliefs on images from books and the media. There are teachers who misinterpret the language or body language of Black boys, who misread their facial expressions. This was not a factor in my classroom. After leaving my Period 1 AP English class, students typically went to Trigonometry or AP Calculus, AP Government, and Physics or AP Chemistry. By coincidence, all these classes were taught by African American teachers who had a reputation for being both challenging and caring. As an African American woman, I am definitely in tune with the culture. I live in the community. I am the mother of three African American sons who attended schools nearby. At no time did students ever complain of cultural insensitivity. (They did complain about other things, mainly the amount of homework they were expected to do.)

Although I believe that cultural sensitivity is a factor that explains lack of achievement in some school situations, I did not feel it was a factor for my students.

**Factor 4: African American Males Will Achieve Better If They Have African American Male Teachers**

I agree that Black boys need Black male teachers as role models. However, having African American male teachers did not solve the achievement problem for my students. My AP English students had four African American male teachers that year (AP Calculus, AP Government, Physics, and sports). As I have already stated, all the men were culturally sensitive and had positive relationships with their students. The male teachers, however, also found that the young men in their classes were not performing at the same levels as the young women. The race and gender of teachers did not explain the underachievement of my male students.

**Factor 5: Economic Factors Cause Lack of Resources in Urban Schools**

According to the College Board (1995), many urban schools lack the necessary resources. It is true that our school as a whole experienced a shortage of books. However, these students were enrolled in a magnet program that had sufficient books for its students. In addition, we had computers in the classroom. Our program also had few problems with student mobility. All but three students enrolled in my AP English class on the 1st day.
The other three enrolled during the 1st week. No student left the school. All the young men except one had attended our school for 3 or 4 years.

Although there are schools that do have issues with resources and student mobility, my program does not. I eliminated this factor as one of the causes for the underperformance of my students.

**Factor 6: Influence of Gangs and Violence**

Some researchers point to the influence of gangs, violence, and other distractions in low-income communities. Even if students themselves lived in families that were not struggling financially, living in a neighborhood in which gangs are prevalent may have a negative impact.

The affect of gang activity on my students is not clear. None of these young men were affiliated with gangs. Nine of the 10 were members of varsity athletic teams. This took most of their free time and kept them involved in positive activities with other young men. The 10th student is an artist who spent the bulk of his free time drawing or playing computer games. Although it is possible that living in a low-income neighborhood and being exposed to gangs may have affected my students’ attitudes toward high achievement, I could not determine the impact from the information I had gathered on the students.

**REDESIGNING SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS**

Having determined that these factors did *not* account for the underperformance of African Americans in my class, I decided that I would need to continue to look for ways to redesign my classroom to make learning more accessible for these young men. Knowing that I had parental support, a culturally sensitive staff of teachers, and sufficient resources, I felt that the next step was to make further changes in curriculum, teaching strategies, and attitudes.

**Pedagogy, Athletics, and Attitudes: Exploring Other Factors**

As I continued my research into African American male achievement, I began to look more closely at changing pedagogy, helping students balance academics and athletics, and improving student and teacher attitudes. Interviews, surveys, and observations of the young men in my class suggest that many African American males are bored and wish for more ac-
tive learning opportunities. They also feel overwhelmed by the long hours they need to devote to both sports and homework. Many are complacent, feeling that lower levels of achievement are acceptable, and many are not pushed by teachers who also accept lower levels of achievement from African American males than from their other students.

**African American Males Do Not Achieve Because They Do Not Have the Opportunity for Active Learning**

Early on, I decided to make changes in my style of teaching in hopes of accommodating the needs of more students, especially African American males. I included more opportunities for small-group learning activities, literature circles, and projects. The young men reported that they liked working in groups. The products they created, however, were not of the best quality they could produce. For example, I allowed students to form their own groups for a magazine project due after the AP exam, with the freedom to write a poem, creative essay, and piece of fiction on virtually any topic. Two groups were exclusively male. Two other groups were of both genders, and two groups were females only. One young man decided to work alone. The boys-only groups had difficulties meeting intermediate and final deadlines. One of the magazines contained subject matter inappropriate for a high school audience. In the mixed-gender groups, the young men produced some of their better writing. The young man who worked alone produced the best work he had written all year. Its content was creative, deep, and original. He could have, however, benefited greatly from having had a peer editor.

I had thought that the freedom of choice in both what to write and whom to work with would inspire the boys to do their best work. That feature alone was not enough, however. Simply offering more opportunities for active learning is not enough. I needed to rethink the way in which I structured those opportunities.

**Time Commitment to Sports**

I know that I'm stepping onto the turf of controversy when I say that sports may actually hinder some young men from reaching their academic potential. I do believe that sports have contributed to the academic success of the young men in my class to an extent. Of the 10 young men, 9 were on varsity sports teams. They had all been involved in organized sports for many years. I believe that this activity gave them a chance to be around
positive male role models and to interact with other young men who were generally engaged in positive behavior. Sports also gave them the incentive to earn decent grades, required for them to be eligible. Sports had probably kept them away from the negative influence of gangs and drugs.

But I am looking at high academic achievement, not at getting grades good enough for eligibility, typically only a 2.0. The young men in my AP class reported spending many hours after school at practices and games. Most said they arrived home after 7:00 or even 8:00 p.m. each day. After weeks of 14-hour days, they were physically drained and often did not have enough energy left to adequately prepare for class. In addition to my AP English class, most of the young men had AP Government, Calculus, and Physics. Each teacher required an hour of homework a night. There just were not enough hours in the day for school, practice, homework, chores, and sleep.

Compare these young men to the young women in the class. The girls were engaged in after-school activities too, but these activities often supported their academic growth. They were on the newspaper staff and active members of student government. Although they also stayed after school for activities, they did not do so every night of the week. Neither were they physically drained upon arriving home. Most of the girls devoted the necessary time each night to their studies. (Some girls did not, because of their own issues: One was a teen mother; two others worked long hours to help with the family finances.) The boys on average had a hard time competing with their female counterparts who had the time and physical energy to study.

I am not at all suggesting that young men should not be involved in sports. There is much to learn about collaboration from being on a team, about self-discipline by engaging in daily practice, about setting and achieving goals. Sports are a valuable part of the school curriculum and African American males need to be involved, but it is the extent of involvement that I question.

**Student Attitudes Toward Achievement**

The College Board report (1999) includes "cultural differences and peer influences" as factors that inhibit achievement among underrepresented minorities. The Writing Project fellows at the Urban Issues Conference also cited student attitudes as a major factor in lack of achievement. Because many African American males grow up in an environment in which their peer group does not discuss school, work together on homework, or share insights on how to achieve, they miss opportunities for advancement.
The culture of the school did not encourage young men to excel academically. In my non-AP classes I overheard students accuse others who were particularly enthusiastic about the class of "brown nosing." In AP classes it seemed safer to show one's intellect, but perhaps the outside forces of African American teen culture influence attitudes toward learning even in advanced classes.

Changing the culture of an entire school is a daunting task. Because our magnet program is a "school within a school," the staff has been more successful in getting students to have a more positive attitude toward achievement, but we need to continue to work in this area.

**Teacher Attitudes**

I wondered if the teachers these students had encountered, myself among them, were guilty of letting the boys do less than their best? I knew that these young men were varsity athletes who were challenged to do their best on the court and field. Like many other African American boys, they had learned early in life that their coaches, teammates, and parents had high expectations for them. Athletically, Black boys have permission to excel.

At my high school, most conversations about the achievement of African American males focus on their getting good enough grades to be eligible for sports or graduation. Too many young men are allowed to opt out of honors and advanced-placement courses. Many teachers are content to have young Black men sit quietly and obediently in their classrooms, earning Cs.

I shared my concerns with a Writing Project fellow who taught in the room next door to me. He recommended that I be more demanding and more direct with the students. He had taught several of the young men the previous year and was aware of their lackadaisical attitude toward their English work. "You've got to get in their face," he said. "Don't let them get away with it."

As the school year came to a close, I felt I had made only moderate progress toward helping the African American males in my class reach their academic potential. I had not succumbed to the temptation to remove any of them from the class, despite one grading period in which five of them earned Ds, which they later brought up to Cs. I had tried to be more demanding, letting them know I believed in their ability and that I would not accept less than their best. But in June the surveys they filled out showed that they knew they could have been better students. I wondered how they would fare in college.
YEAR 2: HEADED FOR THE STARS

As I began Year 2 of my study on African American males who were underperforming in AP classes, I ran into a major problem: I had no students to study. Six of the seven young men in my AP class that year were high-performing students. The seventh was a transfer student who came to our school because, he said, his previous school was not challenging enough. He desired to be in AP but did not have the academic background the other students had. One of the young men would go on to be the valedictorian. Another was our school’s Berkeley scholar, whose high academic achievement and 3-year participation in a special university program guaranteed him both admission and a scholarship to the University of California at Berkeley. A third young man would go on to receive the most scholarships of any senior that year.

In light of the new data, I shifted my research focus to try to discover why these young men were so successful. What was the secret to their success, and could these results be replicated?

The journey toward high achievement for these young men began well before their senior year. Through interviews and personal essays written for college admission, I was able to see some common experiences that had led to their success.

Faith in God

I videotaped an interview with four of the young men and asked each one, “To what do you attribute your success?” Three of the four young men stated that their faith in God was responsible for their success. Church played a prominent role in the lives of these students. Beverly Moss from Ohio State University has written about the importance of the church in the African American community and its “distinct role in education” (2000, p. 196). She states that “at the center of this instruction is the example that the minister set, as a literate person whose literacy practices and literate behavior influence the majority of the congregation” (p. 196). The contemporary Black church continues to encourage education among its members. Some churches give small scholarships to their college students. College acceptances and graduations are sometimes mentioned during the announcement portion of the worship service.

While educators must be careful not to overstep the boundaries between church and state, we cannot ignore the powerful influence of the church on the lives of our students. Many students who are actively engaged in their
church find it easier to avoid illegal drugs, gangs, and violence. For many students, faith in God is one factor in their success.

Choice of Friends

In a videotaped interview, the young men spoke of making the decision to have positive people as friends. My students sounded very much like the young men who wrote the book *The Pact* (Davis, Jenkins, Hunt, & Page, 2003). *The Pact* tells the true story of three young African American men who made a promise to support one another in their quest to become doctors. "We grew up in poor, broken homes in New Jersey neighborhoods riddled with crime, drugs, and death. . . ." But despite these challenges, two became medical doctors and one became a dentist. They write about the impact of friends in the lives of young people.

The lives of most impressionable young people are defined by their friends, whether they are black, white, Hispanic, or Asian; whether they are rich, poor, or middle-class; whether they live in the city, the suburbs, or the country. Among boys, particularly, there seems to be some macho code that says to gain respect, you have to prove that you're bad. We know firsthand that the wrong friends can lead you to trouble. But even more, they can tear down hopes, dreams, and possibilities. We know, too, that the right friends can inspire you, pull you through, rise with you. (pp. 2–3)

My students spoke about "keeping the right people surrounding me" and "staying with the honors crowd." On the surface, this sounds elitist or snobbish, but what the young men meant, I believe, is that they chose to associate with students who went to class on time, who did their homework, who did not belong to gangs, who avoided the streets. Unfortunately, one of the young men in the class did choose to associate with a negative crowd. This association led him into risky behavior that later affected his education.

Support from Home

All four of the young men mentioned an adult in the home who had encouraged them and supported them in their quest for an education. In the interview, one spoke about how his mother is always on him about doing homework. Another spoke about what his father has done to support him. In their autobiographical essays for their college applications, one young man mentioned the positive influence his grandmother had had on his education; another mentioned his mother’s influence.
It is hard to tell which came first, support from home or the individual desire to achieve. In either case, the individual choices the young men made were supported by an adult in the home. While the students did not mention other factors, I could see a pattern that could have been partly responsible for their success.

**Prior Preparation**

During Year 1 of my study, I spoke to Mike Johansson from the College Board about my concerns about my students’ progress. He suggested that prior preparation might have been a factor. With this in mind, I thought about the preparation that the Year 2 boys had had and compared it to the preparation of the Year 1 students. The Year 1 boys entered high school just as our school district was reconfiguring junior highs to middle schools and sending ninth grades to high school. The Year 1 students were among our first ninth graders. Three of the young men had been in my ninth-grade English class. The others were taught by various teachers throughout the school. All of us were teaching ninth grade for our first time.

Three of the Year 2 students had also been in my English 9 class. I had told them and all the ninth graders I had that year about the AP program and encouraged them to make taking AP classes one of their goals. I also shared information from our college office about the opportunity for them to take college classes while in high school. One of the Year 2 students successfully completed a college course at a local community college while still a ninth grader.

During the time of the study my high school had come to the attention of the school district and media as one of the schools in the district that offered the least number of AP classes. We offered five courses; schools in some suburban neighborhoods offered three times as many. When the Year 2 students were juniors, our high school was given additional funds to start more AP classes. I decided to offer AP English Language, a course usually taught to juniors. Four of the Year 2 students took this class with me. One other student took the course with another teacher.

I believe that this early foray into AP had a positive effect on my students. While I was in the middle of my study with the Year 1 seniors, I kept comparing senior boys to the junior boys. The juniors were stronger writers and better readers. I wondered if this achievement was an anomaly, caused by an unusual concentration of good students, or if taking AP in the junior year might be a significant factor.
Teaching Practices

I became more aware of the need for AP students to engage in active learning and to have choices. The following list shows some of the activities I included to give students opportunity to active learning and choice.

1. Act out chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* (11th grade)
2. Generate the questions for the class discussion on an assigned book (11th and 12th)
3. Present polished papers and work-in-progress pieces to the class in author’s chair (11th and 12th)
4. Participate in Oxford debates on a controversial issue (11th)
5. Choreograph and perform a dance as part of the Greek chorus in *Oedipus Rex* (12th)
6. Teach a chapter of the book to the class (12th)
7. Select from a poetry textbook the specific poems the class will study in depth (12th)
8. Work in a group to design, write, and publish a magazine (12th)

Outside Resources

Three of the students I interviewed mentioned at least one program or resource outside the classroom as one of the factors for their success. One mentioned “being in clubs.” Another referred to the tutoring and work-experience programs at our school. Another simply said that “we have a lot of resources” in this school to help students.

I wondered about the impact of a university program on these students. The Year 2 students had been in an Early Academic Outreach Program through the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). An initiative to eliminate affirmative action in our state had just passed. With affirmative action eliminated for college admissions, the number of African Americans admitted to competitive public universities such as UCLA and the University of California (UC), Berkeley dropped dramatically. In response, the UC campuses were given money for intervention programs to help underrepresented minorities become not only eligible but also competitive for UC admission.

UCLA developed the Career Based Outreach Program (CBOP) for students in high schools that sent low numbers of students to the university. Four of the six young men in my class had participated in the program, once a week for about 15 weeks, during their English class in ninth grade.
UCLA sent undergraduates to our school to talk with the students about what it takes to be admitted to a UC campus. They showed students a completed college application and had students evaluate it as an admissions officer would. While the CBOP program was valuable, English teachers complained about giving up so much of their class time.

During the 10th-grade year, the program was offered after school. The group met in my room; UCLA students ran the meetings. We ran into an attendance problem early on. Almost none of the young men could come because they were attending athletic practices. In fact, only one of the young men in my Year 2 senior AP class had attended during 10th grade. I recall a conversation he had with a CBOP fellow.

CBOP fellow: What grades did you get on your report card.
Student: Five As and one B.
The group applauded.
CBOP fellow: What are you going to do to turn that B into an A?

She was responding to the reality that the typical UCLA student now has a weighted GPA of 4.0. Although I worried that CBOP students would focus too much on getting high grades and not enough on learning, I believed it was important to make students aware of what they must do to have access to major universities.

Because I attended the CBOP meetings, I was able to share the most important information with my entire class. For example, I attended a weekend retreat at the university, where a graduate student explained what readers wanted to see in the college essay. I would later use that information to help my seniors write much better college admissions essays. A professor explained to an audience of 9th and 10th graders how to write an argumentative essay, giving them a much more sophisticated structure than they generally learn in high school. Again, I incorporated that information in my classroom practice so that all my students wrote essays with more depth and insight than they had been producing.

Year 2 students also participated in other programs that shared the following characteristics:

1. High Expectations: Students who participated were held to high standards and the leaders in the program believed that the students could achieve these high standards.
2. Knowledgeable Leaders: The leaders brought in information not readily available on our campus.
3. Caring Individuals: The people who worked with our students genuinely cared about the students and their future.

FOLLOW-UP ON THE YEAR 1 STUDENTS

Ten out of the 11 young men in my senior AP class in the 1st year of the study chose to attend 4-year universities, and all successfully completed their 1st year of college. Two returned to speak to my classes to give advice to the juniors and seniors. They exhorted students to work harder while in high school. They also reported that they liked college and had received satisfactory grades. Both of the young men had opted not to play sports in their 1st year of college.

I spoke with three other young men when they returned for the homecoming football game in October. They also were successful in college and reported that they relied heavily on what they had learned in their high school AP classes. I heard about the progress of three others through younger siblings who still attend our high school and through the returning students. Once again, I was pleased to hear that the young men were still enrolled and successful in college.

The one young man who was not underperforming while in my class also returned to visit the school. He spoke to my senior English class, which included many varsity football players. The returning student had also been on the football team and had received a football scholarship for college. After answering questions about what it was like to be a student-athlete, he told the class, “My scholarship is for 5 years. I’m going to get a master’s degree, since the university is paying for it.”

I am in the process of getting more precise data, but these early reports indicate that being in AP classes helped prepare even the underperforming Year 1 students for a successful 1st year of college.

FOLLOW-UP ON YEAR 2 STUDENTS

Five of the six Year 2 African American male students attended 4-year universities. They, however, had more options than their Year 1 counterparts. These young men were accepted into several competitive universities. One is on the staff of a student magazine at UCLA. He returned to be a guest speaker at our annual Circle of Scholars. Sadly, one of the six committed a crime and was sent to prison. His decision to hang out with the wrong
crowd temporarily derailed him. Instead of giving up, however, he kept in touch with the school and asked to borrow a graphing calculator so that he could continue his studies while incarcerated. He has since been released from prison and is now attending a 4-year university. As the study came to a close. I had only word-of-mouth information about one other. The valedictorian is doing fine at UCLA.

REFLECTIONS AS A TEACHER AND PARENT

At the end of my 2-year study I know that I am still far from finding all the answers to the questions I have on African American male achievement. I am beginning to see patterns for achievement and underperformance, but I realize that individual students may not fall within the pattern. The factors that led the five young men to achieve in Year 2 may not have the same positive impact on all African American males. Still, I think it is valuable to summarize how this study has shaped my beliefs and teaching practices.

I know not to assume that all African American males are underperforming academically. This misconception sets some young men up for low expectations from teachers and leads them to be placed in classes that do not challenge them sufficiently. I have learned that all African American males who are underperforming are not doing so for the same reasons. Using a combination of written surveys, talks with the student and parent, analysis of the student's work, and observation of the student, I now try to determine which factors may be affecting an individual student. I know how to eliminate those that don't apply so that I can focus on the real problem.

I constantly evaluate my attitude toward achievement among the African American males in my class. I know that regardless of race and gender, we can all hold attitudes that cause us to have lower expectations from some students than from others. Students can often detect these attitudes even if we say all the right words about having high expectations. At my school, I am working to communicate this message to counselors, teachers, and administrators. As a parent, I have learned to be more direct in talking with the adults who work with my sons.

To support students who are also athletes, I work to help them balance sports practice, homework, and the need for sleep. I have restructured my instructional practices to give students more lead time on assignments so that they can use the weekend to get ahead.

Most important, I have become even more determined not to give up on African American male students. Giving up usually comes in the form
of excluding capable but underperforming students from advanced classes. Rather than exclude young men from honors and AP classes, I now do what I can to recruit them. I retain them, even if their mediocre grades do not seem to warrant it, and I require them to work.

Underachievement for some African American males begins early in their school career. I hope to one day see a study that follows African American boys from pre-K to college and examines what teachers, parents, and students need to do at each grade level to encourage African American male students to reach their potential. Perhaps we can invite young men to be coresearchers with us in finding solutions to this problem. As we find ways to better support our African American male students, we will have more opportunities to ask, “What is the secret of your success?”

REFERENCES


