

## Prefatory: Fearless Faith

Floyd D. Beachum  
*Lehigh University*

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,  
the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

Under normal circumstances I would write an essay with a much longer and more academically-inclined title, but sometimes the situation requires one to break from established patterns out of necessity or sometimes conviction. This endeavor is a case of the latter. As the words you now read escape my mind and find their way to the page, I wrestle with the plight of African American males in K-12 education and beyond. At this point we are most certainly aware and inundated with both stories and statistics on the issues and problems. We know about high dropout rates (especially in the largest urban areas in the U.S.), the achievement/opportunity gap that ultimately impacts life outcomes, higher numbers of suspensions and expulsions given to African American males, and their overrepresentation in special education. If the alarming ubiquitous statistics are not enough, we could journey to almost any inner-city area in the United States and witness African American males who feel out of touch with the larger society, discouraged by the educational system, doubtful about the future, and downright disgusted with themselves as well as the powers that be. In actuality, there is more than enough blame to go around. However, this is not an essay on the same blame game that reinforces shame. This essay seeks to maintain and sustain a perspective that can help elevate this situation to a higher intellectual plane. Even though the present educational plight of many African American males seems dismal, if not abysmal, there remains a force that will not allow us to give up, given in, or get out. I am calling this notion *fearless faith*. West (2008) captured the essence of fearless faith when he wrote, "Black people have never had the luxury to believe in the innocence of America. Although we've experienced the worst of America, we still believe that the best of America can emerge" (p. 23). This essay briefly examines the historical legacy of fearless faith, argues for optimal educational situations for African American

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\* Correspondence concerning this prefatory should be addressed to Floyd Beachum, Bennet Professor of Urban School Leadership, Lehigh University Iacocca Hall, Room A-211, 111 Research Drive, Bethlehem, PA 18015, Email: fdb209@lehigh.edu

males, provides some recommendations for future progress, and suggests some concluding thoughts for the *Journal of African American Males in Education* (JAAME).

### Looking back to Move Forward

Even a cursory examination of African American history reveals the importance of a sense of pride in the midst of peril, determination in the midst of detriment, and hope in the midst of hopelessness – which personifies fearless faith. If we were to take slavery in the United States for instance, we note a significant example of people endeavoring against insurmountable odds.

The chains of the American Negro's captivity were forged in Africa. Prince and peasant, merchant and agriculturalist, warrior and priest, Africans were drawn into the vortex of the Atlantic slave trade and funneled into the sugar fields, the swampy rice lands, or the cotton and tobacco plantations of the New World. The process of enslavement was almost unbelievably painful and bewildering for the Africans. Completely cut off from their native land, they were frightened by the artifacts of the white man's civilization and terrified by his cruelty until they learned that they were only expected to work for him as they been accustomed to doing in their native land. Still, some were so remorse they committed suicide; others refused to learn the customs of whites and held on to the memory of the African cultural determinants of their own status. (Blassingame, 1979, pp. 3-4)

It is obvious that slavery was an evolutionary industry with an accompanying mentality (i.e., white superiority/black inferiority) that employed physical intimidation and terror for the purpose financial gain and racial supremacy. At the same time it should be noted that even amid these overwhelming and impossible odds, the Africans rebelled, resisted, sought ways to keep historical continuity and cultural traditions. Most of all they found ways to reaffirm their own human worth and forged ahead with in the hope of a better tomorrow.

I would certainly be remised if I did not mention the role of education in the lives of the enslaved Africans. Except for maybe the most basic information, Africans were denied the right to formal education (reading and writing) under the penalty of harsh punishments. Cornelius (1991) provided an example from a former enslaved African: "The first time you was caught trying to read or write you was whipped with a cow hide the next time with a cat-o-nine and the third time they cut the first joint often your forefinger" (p. 66). Even with such harsh penalties for daring to become learned individuals, enslaved Africans in America still hungered for education and risked their very lives to attain even a miniscule portion, somehow knowing that education was the key to freedom. Perry (2003) provided critical insight when she wrote,

While learning to read was an individual achievement, it was fundamentally a communal act. For the slaves, literacy affirmed not only their individual freedom but also the freedom of their people. Becoming literate obliged one to teach others. Learning and teaching were two sides of the same coin, part of the same moment. Literacy was not something you kept for yourself; it was to be passed on to others, to the community. Literacy was something to share. (p. 14)

This quote reveals that education was not achieved for its own sake; *education was synonymous with liberation* (Beachum, Dentith, & McCray, 2004). This mentality would guide and direct the slaves who in their long journey to freedom and beyond.

The American Civil War climaxed with the defeat of the Southern Confederacy and the total abolishment of slavery as a formal institution. Even after slavery, African Americans in the South found themselves still struggling for basic human rights under a new system called segregation. Although the formal structure of slavery was gone, its remnants survived in a superstructure based on insidious forms of overt and covert racism (Loewen, 1995). Jim Crow laws were marked by the separation of races - which constituted mostly whites and blacks at the time. Woodward (1974) stated that these codes:

extended to churches and schools, to housing and jobs, to eating and drinking. Whether by law or by custom, that ostracism extended to virtually all forms of public transportation, to sports and recreations, to hospitals, orphanages, prisons, and asylums, and ultimately to funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries (p. 7).

The racism African Americans experienced was based primarily on a philosophy of White superiority and Black inferiority. As a result, many African Americans viewed education as a way to combat the dominant ideology of the day that sought to stifle their integrity, denigrate their spirits, and denounce their humanity. African American schools in the segregated South largely encouraged academic excellence and self-efficacy through the actions of caring and committed educators as well as supportive community members (Beachum & McCray, in-press; Perry, 2003). Thus, these segregated African American schools during this time period not only provided academic preparation to students, but it also prepared them for the world beyond the schoolhouse doors. This included the immediate world of segregation they would have to navigate, but they also encouraged students to dream of better futures and pursue those dreams with tenacity.

At this point one may wonder exactly how did we arrive at the current state of African American education, especially with regard to African American males. The answer is a complex mixture of history, policy, and practices (the most accurate answers are not always the easy ones). The focus on education for liberation seemed to lessen with the elimination of segregated, all-Black schools and increasing integration, the conversion of obvious to subtle racist practices in schools, and the change in the attitudes of students regarding the value of education. Segregated schools, as previously noted, gave African American children at the time academic preparation as well as preparation for life in a world that basically viewed them as incompetent, inept, and inadequate. Schools reinforced their spirits as segregated society tried its best to break them down. This created a culture of resiliency for these students (Perry, 2003). When integration began, many dedicated African American teachers and administrators lost their jobs and their influence on many African American youth (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2007). Furthermore, as opportunities expanded, African American students opted for other majors besides education (Kunjufu, 2002); thus, severely impacting the Black teaching pipeline. Therefore, the educators who provided quality education, grounded in liberation, were lost along with the narrowing of the pipeline that would replace them. In their place, white educators mainly began educating African American students, with mixed results.

In sum, the notion of education for liberation decreased with the spread of integration and the loss of African American educators. Many white educators took the place of Black ones, but did not reinforce the same notions of academic and social preparation (for a sometimes racially hostile world). What results sometimes is a situation where African American students, especially African American males are under-served, under-educated, and over-stigmatized in schools (Kunjufu, 2002). And this does not mean that African American educators are immune from this kind of bias, they too can have a negative impact on African American students when

they lack high commitment and high expectations (Kunjufu, 2002). Once these students realize that they are being disrespected, dismissed, or discouraged from a high quality education, many begin to “act the part” and collude in a process of that undermines their education (see Beachum & McCray, in-press). They academically disengage, become behavior problems, are more easily lured into illicit activities, express an open defiance to authority, and ultimately end up failing, dropping out, or being passed along with little chance of every achieving high academic success. Of course, this is a very concise explanation of the educational situation. For a more detailed account, see the work of Beachum and McCray, (2008); Hill (2009); Kailin (2002); Morris (2009); and Perry (2003). What follows are lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> century education, especially with regard to African American males around attitudes and liberation.

### Attitude Determines Altitude

As noted earlier, educators can fall into the trap of having low expectations for students of color, especially African American males. Once this happens, it begins to show up in their teaching practices. They assume that these students do not know the answer, place them in the low-performing workgroups, and/or send them out of the classroom for the most trivial reasons (McCray & Beachum, 2006). Educational leaders too, can fall into this trap by engaging in disproportionate discipline. This is where African American males especially, get suspended more often and receive harsher disciplinary penalties than their white counterparts (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). These negative outcomes for African American males get at the issue of educators who do not truly believe in the success and potential of these students. It is a truly interesting phenomenon, yet one that makes complete sense, we cannot hide who we truly are, what we truly believe will come out in what we do (one way or another). Kunjufu (1993) stated it this way, “we act out what is in us, nothing more, nothing less” (pp. 75-76). For children who are still developing their values, there will be some confusion and contradictions; but for adults whose values are pretty well-developed, one would hope that educators, entrusted with the future of multitudes of students, would not victimize these students in a subtle conspiracy of low expectations. Unfortunately, this is the case far too often (Beachum, Dentith, McCray, & Boyle, 2008; Dantley, 2005; Handcock, 2006; McCray, Alston, & Beachum, 2006; Tatum, 1997; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

While attitudes matter for the adults working with youth, they most certainly matter for the youth themselves, especially African American males. Too often they can fall prey to the seductive lure of bravado, patriarchy, and hyper-masculine identities. Frequently, these are tough images created to hide self-doubt, fear, frustration, and vulnerability (Dyson, 2004; White & Cones, 1999). We need to instill in African American males the idea that their power does not necessarily come from physical strength, but rather mental and spiritual strength. The attitude of “I don’t care” and “me, myself, and I” needs to be replaced with “we, the community, and us”. Attitudes of academic underachievement, misogyny, and social disruption/anarchy should be transposed with high academic achievement, respect for all women, and social stability. Of course, I recognize the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the complex and cerebral (meaning that it happens largely on a subconscious level) situation that ensnares, entraps, and inculcates African American males with the aforementioned negative attitudes. At the same time, I recognize that the potential and possibilities of positive people pointed in the right direction can be powerful. Simply put, a difficult situation is not necessarily an impossible situation.

## Education for Liberation: The Remix

To a large extent, African Americans have long believed that education was a vehicle for social advancement, the key to freedom from ignorance, and foundation for social change (i.e., liberation). Perry (2003) elucidated the following in reference to how African Americans in the past viewed education:

Academic achievement, doing well in school, and pursuing learning...is always accomplished in the face of considerable constraints, whether the impoverished condition of the local school, the absence of a local high school, laws that made it a crime to teach slaves to read and write, or a teacher's or school's ideology of African-American intellectual inferiority. These constraints were tied to the social identity and the political location of African Americans as African Americans.

The pursuit of education...is not casual. It is seen and presented as intense, persistent, and supported and fueled by an explicit and continually articulated belief system. This explicit, and continually articulated belief system functions as a counternarrative, one that stands in opposition to the dominant society's notions about the intellectual capacity of African Americans, the role of learning in their lives, the meaning and purpose of school, and the power of their intellect. (p. 49)

From this quote we can glean some ideas for contemporary K-12 education. First is the notion of resiliency. Teachers, school administrators, and other service providers should all reinforce this notion, with all students, but especially with African American males. Perry alluded to the idea that the pursuit of education usurped notions of poverty, inferior facilities (or no facilities), racist laws and customs, and educator ideology. This would require an authentic belief and genuine concern for the well-being and welfare of these students. In K-12 education, this kind of reinforcement of resiliency is facilitated through positive relationships. "The significant power of relationships cannot be underestimated, as it is in relationships that we are equipped to come to engage others' perspectives, positions, and predispositions, which have a monumental impact on our own" (Beachum, Dentith, McCray, & Boyle, 2008, p. 18). By educators forging real relationships (I say real, because students know when adults are being fake) with African American males a sense of resiliency as described by Perry (2003) can be communicated and reinforced.

The second concept we can extract from Perry is a counternarrative (or counter-storytelling). These counternarratives told a different story to African American students, one that countered the dominant narrative of African American intellectual inferiority. DeCuir and Dixon (2004) wrote, "counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups" (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004, p. 27). Today's educational climate is different than long ago (i.e., segregation); however, some of the same messages are continuously communicated. "Even though we exist in a society devoid of the visible mechanisms of segregation and alienation (i.e., "Whites only" signs, Jim Crow laws, etc.) found in a pre-*Brown* context, many students still readily get the message by other covert means that their skin color is inferior" (Beachum, Dentith, McCray, & Boyle, 2008, p. 19). "The society is now open. Few respectable people will publicly assert that Black people are intellectually inferior. The visible, in-your-face manifestations of oppression have been mostly eliminated. But you can scarcely find a Black student who cannot recall or give you a litany of instances when he or she was

automatically assumed to be intellectually incompetent” (Perry, 2003, pp. 96-97). The messages alluded to here come from stereotyping, media bombardment (Beachum & McCray, 2004), micro-aggressions (Tatum, 1997), and the continuous realization that racism is alive and well whenever a controversial issue arises (e.g., the O.J. Simpson verdict, the initial response to Hurricane Katrina, and the Jena 6 situation). The point here is that educators, parents, and other stakeholders should provide a counternarrative to these messages of inferiority (McCray, 2008). These messages are not limited to attacks on intellectual ability, they also can come in the form of popular media imagery found on television, the Internet, and in music. Even today, African Americans are overrepresented on the news as criminals, thugs, and menaces to society (Kitwana, 2002; White & Cones, 1999). In addition, the new popularity of reality-based television programs now characterizes many young African Americans as belligerent, offensive, vulgar, profane, and sexually-obsessed (West, 2008). Similarly, popular music and videos repeatedly promote themes of materialism, disrespect for women, and violence (Beachum & McCray, 2008; Dyson, 2007). White and Cones (1999) explained, “Not only do European Americans believe that these caricatures represent the reality of Black male life, but Black male youths may aspire to live up to these images because they are popularized and romanticized” (p. 72). Nevertheless, it is critical for concerned communities to create a culture that supports counternarratives to these messages and images. Through resiliency and counternarratives, African American students can continue to honor and uphold the legacy of education for liberation.

#### Final Thoughts and New Beginnings

As I bring this essay to a close, I also would like to begin a new discourse. This discourse is one that is well-anchored in the history of the African American experience. A downfall for far too many African American males is that we do not know where we came from or where we are going. This discourse also emphasizes the importance of attitude in all that we do. Whether you are an educator working with African American male students or an African American male in a school, your attitude impacts your work, interactions with others, and reality. This discourse also pushes for counternarratives that correct years of mis-education, overt discrimination, and historical alienation. In essence, this discourse embraces the best, and sometimes worst, of the African American experience and uses it as a torch to illuminate contemporary and future practices.

It is my hope that the *Journal of African American Males in Education* (JAAME) can become a primary platform for such a discourse as well as a place for multiple discourses. There may be a multiplicity of answers to our most burning questions and we must keep this in mind. JAAME is positioned at the frontier of new opportunities. It has the potential to inform the research by enhancing our understanding of African American males philosophically, methodologically, and experientially. With regard to practice, it can enlighten individuals who do the day-to-day work of improving the plight of African American males, but need new ideas, new perspectives, and new practices. Ultimately, JAAME has the potential to be a venue that best exemplifies fearless faith.

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Bio for Dr. Floyd D. Beachum

Floyd D. Beachum is the Bennett Professor of Urban School Leadership at Lehigh University. He is also an Associate Professor in the Educational Leadership program in the College of Education. He received his doctorate in Leadership Studies from Bowling Green State University. He also holds a master's in education and a bachelor of science in social studies education from Alabama State University. He has a total of 15 years in education (K-12 and higher education) as well as experience as a substitute teacher, student teacher, classroom teacher, and lead teacher for social studies. Before coming to Lehigh, he served as Associate Professor and program coordinator for Educational Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His research interests include: leadership in urban education, moral and ethical leadership, and social justice issues K-12 schools. He has authored several peer-reviewed articles on these topics in journals such as the *Journal of School Leadership*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*, *Urban Education*, and the *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*. In addition, he is co-editor of the book, *Urban Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Research, Issues, and Perspectives* and a co-author of the book *Radicalizing educational leadership: Dimensions of social justice*.