Dreaming of Gold: How Educators Can Reconcile Athletics and Academics for Black Student-Athletes

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James and Howard's (2019) research paper "When dreams take flight: How teachers imagine and implement an environment that nurtures Blackness at an Africentric school in Toronto, Ontario" investigates the concept of aspirational dreams. They argue that dreams are "the as-yet unrealized goal of black freedom that motivates black struggle" (James & Howard, 2019, p. 1; Ladson-Billings, 1994/2009, p. xv). I contend that dreams possess duality in relation to the experiences and aspirations of Black youth. Dreams can serve as a catalyst towards concrete goals that lead to Black youths' economic success; however, dreams can also become co-opted and stifled by social forces, like educators. Canadian public and Catholic schools drastically shape Black males' aspirations: educators persuade Black males to pursue sports as opposed academics. I contend that sport-based and kinesthetic pedagogies are educational tools that can promote the academic success of Black athletes.

Positionality

Introspective self-reflection can uncover potential biases that can impact the research process. I will critically analyze how my identity shapes my perceptions. I am a woman with Portuguese ancestry. I obtained elementary and secondary education in Ontarian Catholic schools. Based on research and practical lenses, I observed how Ontarian schools shape the dreams of Canadian youth through their hidden curricula which can pose negative implications at both the individual and community level, particularly economic and educational outcome stratification (Nunes, 2014; Pereira, 2018).

According to Brown and Presley (2011), "Among all Canadian minority groups, Portuguese speaking Canadians still display the highest percentages of individuals with only a primary school education ... Furthermore, their proportion of university and college graduates is equal to those of Canadian Aboriginal [Indigenous] communities" (p. 2). A potential cause of this achievement gap involves teachers' biased perceptions of the aspirations and vocational trajectories of Portuguese students. Many educators assume that Portuguese girls will become cleaners, while Portuguese men will become construction workers (Pereira, 2018).

Hence, educators' assumptions prevent their investment of time and effort into fostering Portuguese youths' academic abilities. These negative biases negatively impacted the academic achievement of my fellow Portuguese-Canadians. Consequently, I feel deeply passionate about how to close achievement gaps, and I feel immensely critical of meritocratic rhetoric promulgated in schools (James, 2011).

As an individual with Portuguese ancestry, the causes of my community's achievement gaps differ from the lived experiences of Black communities. As Kulsum Gulamhusein (2021) remarked "The very nature of race and race relations in the western world ... means that a white producer will never truly be able to understand the context of being a person of color, and how that will affect a character's story." I can apply Gulamhusein's (2021) insight to my own research pursuits. While I can develop my knowledge of Black students' educational experiences, I can never fully comprehend the diverse lived realities of Black people. As a result, through this research paper I aim to further my comprehension of Black males' educational experiences within Ontarian public and Catholic schools.

The Labor of Black Athletes

James (2012) examined how coaches and educators influence Black males to pursue the dream of athletic success. Coaches praise Black males for their hard work, athleticism, and eagerness to improve (James, 2012). However, coaches and educators do not encourage Black males to pursue academics. In fact, "If they [Black males] are good at sports, the stereotypical assumption dictates that they are also poor students" (James, 2012, p. 477). Consequently, some Black males pursue athletic success, without the recognition that "Undoubtedly, there is a high cost to living up to the stereotype, such as the inordinate amount of time, energy, and dedication given to learning, playing and mastering their sport, at the expense of their academic work" (James, 2012, p. 479). I agree with James's (2012) recognition of academic costs to solely pursuing sports. However, James (2012) failed to consider the mental, physical, and emotional tole that sports can pose on Black males, as student and professional athletes.

Professor Webber (2024) described the forms of labor in sports. Athletes must adhere to strict diets, maintain constant mental focus, incessantly study their craft, and consistently exercise to achieve peak physical condition (Nartey, 2019; Webber, 2024). This labor can be mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting (Jones, 2017). The precarious nature of the sports industry can cause significant stress (Webber, 2024). Coaches can replace players due to injury or underperformance, without adequate compensation. In addition, Black students must work twice as hard compared to their white counterparts to prove themselves (James, 2012) which I believe extends to both athletic and educational spheres. Hence, I feel that James should expand the implications of Black males only pursuing sports beyond mere academic costs. Instead, he should employ a holistic approach. In other words, James must reframe his analysis to highlight how pursuing both sports and academics can support Black communities' overall health and wellbeing.

Merging Athletic and Academic Identities

Furthermore, James (2012) asserts that "often sport is framed as the red carpet pathway out of poverty and obscurity and into fame and fortune. While a few do achieve their dreams, the vast majority are rudely awakened at a point where they have forgone their opportunity to secure a valid and valuable education" (p. 479). I agree with James (2012) assertion that coaches and educators glamourize sports to Black boys as a gateway for financial success, despite its precarious and competitive nature. Also, I acknowledge that Black athletes who do not gain a sports-related career often pursue academics as an alternative vocation (Jones, 2017).

Nonetheless, I feel that James's perspective furthers an ongoing dichotomy between athletics and academics. In other words, many educators view academics as a pursuit separate from athletics. In fact, Webber (2024) explained how some college and university professors disregard Black students based on the assumption that they wish to only pursue sports. Similarly, many teachers perceive academics as a mere back-up for Black athletes (James, 2012). Hence, I contend that educators must recognize the academic potential of Black athletes. They must show Black male athletes how academics can support the pursuit of sports for Black athletes, especially individuals who may experience academically disengagement.

Sport-as-Pedagogy

I argue that coaches and educators must bridge Black athletes academic and athletic identities to disrupt stereotypes that view Black athletes as academically disinterested and demotivated (James, 2012). Educators and policy makers can transform curricula to reflect real-world experiences and circumstances that Black athletes may experience. For example, English lessons can teach Black athletes how to craft sports-related speeches. Students can gain public speaking techniques to effectively answer questions from sports interviewers. Law classes can describe techniques to comprehend legal jargon within sports contracts. Math instructors can pose financial problems that athletes often experience, like how to budget their income, invest their career earnings, and plan for post-career retirement. Hence, I affirm that curricula can be altered to merge Black students academic and athletic identities.

I argue that Jayne Baker's (2016) ethnographic work demonstrates how educators can leverage sports to bolster students' academic achievement and engagement. Baker (2016) investigated the educational experiences of boys at an elite private school in Toronto. The all-boys private school had class and gender distinctions compared to the student body of Toronto public and Catholic schools within the focus of this study. Nonetheless, educators emphasized how sports can engage male students. Baker (2016) observes "The results of recent competitions were shared, a 'player of the game' was named and asked to come to the front for a handshake and sometimes a prize (like a jersey), and students would be urged to attend the next game ... Sports were a frequent topic of conversation between teachers and students, particularly since many of them worked together as coach and athlete on the same teams, and sports metaphors were woven throughout the school" (p. 146).

Many males experienced high degrees of engagement in academic tasks and discourses, due to its emphasis on sports (Baker, 2016). Hence, I assert that sports can be a useful pedagogical tool to engage some Black student-athletes.

Similarly, I recommend educators to consider the adoption of a pedagogical approach that promotes interactive and tactile/kinesthetic learning. Traditional schools limit students' interest and autonomy due to rules that promote silence and sedentariness (Freire, 1968). Often labelled the feminization of education, these educators fail to allow boys to learn in a way that promotes their biological proclivity towards movement (Heyder & Kessels, 2013; Javid, 2024). The feminization of education worsens for Black males due to educators' racial targeting and discrimination. Teachers often label and penalize Black males for being "disruptive," (James, 2019, p. 394). For example, a Black student Isaiah expressed "I be talkin' in class just like everybody else, but then my mom gets a call, and they like "Isaiah disturbin' class" (Khalifah, 2013, p. 80). Thus, educators must combat disciplinary practices and narratives that target Black males.

Moreover, I affirm that Eurocentric classroom norms prioritize silence and sedentariness as optimal pedagogical approaches. In contrast, Black ways of knowing, being, and doing promote dialogic and kinesthetic learning approaches (Khalifa, 2013). The implementation of these kinesthetic approaches can improve males' academic engagement. Baker (2016) explains "At Boy High it was not uncommon to see boys roaming the classroom, even in the midst of a teacher-driven lesson. Boy High students had the freedom to move about the classroom and the freedom to call out answers without raising their hands. Noise was readily tolerated" (p. 145). Therefore, I believe that interactive classrooms that actively encourage mobility can promote Black student-athletes academic achievement and attainment.

Implications and Recommendations

Thus, I argue that sport-based and kinesthetic pedagogies are educational tools that can promote the academic success of Black athletes. However, there are some implications that educators must consider to promote the culturally responsive implementation of sports-based and kinesthetic pedagogies. I urge educators to use sports-as-pedagogy in a manner that does not essentialize the lived experiences of young people. In other words, educators must recognize that not all Black students-athletes may benefit from and feel interested in sports-as-pedagogy. As a result, it is important to deeply and personally know the students' identities and positionalities without generalizations.

Currently, Black students experience low rates of academic achievement and attainment which can lower their economic and vocational success (James, 2012; James & Howard, 2019). I believe that my research can contribute to uncovering how to resolve these educational gaps, for Black student-athletes' identities can merge through sport-as-pedagogy. Consequently, I assert that educators and policy makers can use this research to engage students in school through a more active and hands-on environment that reflects their sports-related interests.

I assert that greater research must be conducted to advance this field. Research should be conducted to further comprehend how to implement sports-based pedagogies for Black athletes. There also remains a deficit in qualitative research (particularly interviews and ethnographies) to determine the experiences of Black student-athletes who learn from sports-as-pedagogy. Thus, I believe these research implications and recommendations can bolster this field.

The Importance of Dreams

To conclude, I believe that educators must recognize and cultivate the academic abilities of Black youth. Policy and training must be provided to combat educators' stereotypes and assumptions of Black males as only possessing athletic potential. Teachers should also recognize and support Black students who wish to engage in a sports-related career. Educators must reconcile these students' academic and athletic identities. They must use sports-as-pedagogy and tactile/kinesthetic learning approaches to support Black males' academic engagement. Hence, I affirm that dreams serve as powerful tools for students to actualize their goals; teachers possess a key role in being stewards of their students' dreams:

"Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow" (Hughes, 1994).

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Biography

Amanda Pereira-Rego's work focuses on social justice in the fields of Sociology and Education Studies. Amanda aims to combat race-based educational achievement gaps within North America and beyond through her research. She aims to promote qualitative research that reflects the lived experiences of students, while also critically reflecting on how her own intersecting identities can shape the research process.

Amanda's recent research publications reflect her passion for educational equity. She focuses on how educators perpetuate linguistic discrimination against Black students through her research paper entitled "Black Dialects Matter: Ditchin' Code-Switchin' Teachin'" (2023). She analyzes how Black families homeschool to combat anti-Black racism in "Homeschooling: A Space of Resistance for Black Families in Canada" (2025). She investigates how consensual Indigenous education can be a useful pedagogical approach to spark cultural resurgence "Consensual Indigenous Education: A Catalyst for Cultural Resurgence" (2024). Amanda also investigates how Canadian politicians' efforts towards reconciliation remain superficial and surface-level in "The Politics of Performativity: A Call to Revitalize ReconciliACTION." (2024). Through her research, Amanda aims to raise awareness about these pressing educational issues in the hopes of creating substantive and ideological transformations.