

Dreamers and the League: Reimagining Educational Equity of Black Boys

Christopher Michael Spence, Ph.D.^{1*}

¹Selinus University, Italy

christopherspence@selinusuniversity.it

ABSTRACT

Black boys in Western education systems continue to experience barriers shaped by racialised narratives, limited academic affirmation, and media-driven ideals that disproportionately elevate athletic success. This study aimed to explore how Black boys construct their academic and career aspirations and the influence of social, cultural, and institutional forces shaping their behaviour. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10–12 Black boys, and data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes emerged: (1) media-driven distortion of success pathways, where boys internalised messages that prioritised sports over academics; (2) school-based racialised expectations, reflected in experiences of being underestimated, overlooked, or framed as “invisible” within academic spaces; and (3) community and family narratives that both encouraged and constrained aspirations, highlighting tensions between “dream big” messages and structural inequities. Findings illustrated how these narratives collectively influence identity development, self-worth, and educational engagement. The study concludes that academic disengagement is not a product of low ability but of accumulated structural disadvantage and stereotype threat. Therefore, policymakers need to strengthen culturally responsive teaching, expand mentorship and career exposure programs, and counter deficit narratives through media literacy and community-led interventions that affirm academic excellence among Black boys.

Keywords

Black boys, career aspirations, media influence, education system, community, cultural narratives, stereotype threat

Introduction

In 2024, the majority of young black boys in America aspire to become professional athletes or entertainers. This is mainly because they are constantly exposed to media images that lead them to believe they will be successful in those areas (Harper & Simmons, 2019). According to Singh and Kumari (2025), over 60 per cent of Black boys consider sports their favourite profession, yet less than 2 per cent of high school players ever reach the professional stage. This leads to an increasing discrepancy between what they want and what they can attain. Moreover, in the cases where schools which have relatively low finances cannot train Black boys appropriately, they will have few chances to explore other career possibilities. The system consequently forms a limited perspective of the black youth and excludes scholarship achievement in favour of athletic achievement, resulting in a lack of engagement with education. There exist systemic biases against black students that deteriorate their performance in school. It is not that they would not be likely to succeed in fulfilling such dreams; the problem is that such dreams are configured within a cultural and institutional environment that honours physical strength more than intelligence and business development. According to Carter (2017), the issue is complicated by the

cultural popularity of sport among Black people. As a result, success is seen only as a means of playing sports rather than as academic and professional practice. This implies that Black boys do not have a life beyond sports. Boys are frequently directed towards sports, careers in STEM and business, which are not taken into consideration.

This issue raises the need to understand the influence of the institutions, media, and other communal issues on the career goals of Black boys. As Bimper et al. (2017) found, the absence of Black male role models in non-sports professions does not offer young Black boys other alternatives. Moreover, they do not have access to good educational materials and educational advisors. This then drives a higher number of people to the media and community leaders whose careers are not long-term and are unsustainable, and this makes their visions even stronger.

This research explores the social and institutional pressures that reduce the career ambitions of Black boys. It pays attention to the mediating position of the media, education and community. Through examining these forces, the study seeks to comprehend how learning policy, the social anticipations of the community, and media images define the career path of Black boys. It also focuses on the influence of stereotypical threat and cultural capital models on their participation

in learning and attitude to professions. The goals of the study include: to explore how Black boys have their dreams formed by the media and the culture; to explore how the system of racially structured schools turns them off school; and to analyse how community and family transform those dreams. It is vital to broaden the perception of Black boys and their potential beyond sports to improve their school performance and career choices.

Media images play a significant role in shaping the dreams of young Black boys that commonly require them to focus on a narrow set of occupations. According to Hextrum (2020), sports media demonstrate Black boys as just naturally athletic, and this makes them less valuable than their physical performance. However, this assertion is based on an analysis of the modes of representation that examines how the media constructs identities, rather than on how youths consume these images. Sobande et al. (2019) also conclude that the digital media space supports the promotion of narrow ideas of Black masculinity. However, they do not stop to demonstrate how digital platform users promote and reward such constrained performances. Baldwin and Nadelson (2022) dispute the suggestion that media influence is only possible via identity signalling. In their argument, they state that deficit characterisations may directly prevent the growth of literacy and self-efficacy. Both Hextrum (2020) and Sobande et al. (2019) do not focus on the influence of cultural messages on cognitive and academic self-concepts, but only on social identities. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) challenge these perceptions and assume that instead of becoming empowering, digital visibility promotes racial stereotypes. Therefore, media representation can narrow, not broaden, the aspirations of youth. It is also not merely a matter of misrepresentation but a combination of representation, platform structures, and the development of literacy to reduce the career prospects of Black boys.

Educational System Challenges and Black Boys' Disengagement

Schools confine what black boys believe themselves to be by being structured and not prejudiced. Marsh and Walker (2022) discovered

that the perception of Black boys as less capable exists among teachers, but attitudes are not considered by researchers in the context of the influence of policy and day-to-day life in schools. The claims made by Cruz et al. (2021) in the study concerning the relevance of school discipline to the development of the academic disengagement of Black boys are highly beneficial, as it is found that Black boys tend to receive disproportionately punitive regulations. This portrayal fails to account for academic placement systems that assign students to low-level courses. The latter gap was filled by Castro et al. (2024), who revealed that tracking practices place Black boys in the lesser demanding courses, thus depriving them of the opportunity to be exposed to higher-level courses. The practice also supports the expectations outlined by Marsh and Walker (2022). Castro et al. examined this gap by considering the critique of Cruz et al., whose analysis highlights that the problem is structural rather than just a behavioural issue. This work was supported by Bukhari et al. (2025), though they did not consider how students of this system disadvantage themselves. Together, these testimonies demonstrate how discipline, monitoring and expectations are coming together to limit the academic and professional ambitions of Black boys within the school system.

Community and Family Roles in Shaping Aspirations

The community and family contexts shape how Black boys interpret institutional and cultural messages. Crabtree et al. (2020) identify and counter the deficit thinking critique by indicating that Black parents generally have reasonable expectations around their children's academic success. Yet, some tension remains around these findings. Parents' commitment to children's academic performance seems to be derailed by schools that misunderstand and/or undervalue their contributions. While Bryan et al. (2020) show that sustained parental advocacy positively changes boys' academic trajectories, the informal community cultural practices that come from the boys' and their parents' resilience and advocacy tend to be overlooked. Racial literacy in the Black community, as Ellison and Solomon (2019)

describe it, equips Black boys to recognise and critique the dominant negative narratives that mainstream society uses to diminish their potential. In this regard, the authors provide what can be termed “discursive empowerment.” As a result, the boys are capable of overcoming the stereotypes and confining narratives. Still, the notion of discursive empowerment fails to appreciate families’ structural challenges in dealing with unresponsive schools. Integrating these ideas, Gray et al. (2020) argue that the gap between schools’ expectations and the community’s cultural knowledge diminishes Black boys’ sense of belonging at school. Moreover, Gray et al. question schools’ inability to meaningfully align with community strengths. Together, these works evidence that families and communities do not merely take steps to protect boys from negative influences; they also advocate, challenge, and reimagine the systems that shape their expectations. However, few have attempted a theoretical analysis of the intersection between advocacy, cultural capital, and the resistance of institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Three perspectives help to shape Black boys’ aspirations. The theory of social reproduction argues that schools reward dominant cultural capital while marginalising other repertoires. Recent work has shown that this “sorting” of Black boys pushes them toward domains where recognition is easier to attain, like sports (Ershadi, 2025). Still, this framework downplays agency and the media-driven salience of specific futures. The idea of Possible Selves, along with Identity-Based Motivation, addresses this gap as adolescents pursue identities that feel attainable and socially validated. Consequently, highly visible athlete selves are motivationally powerful unless academic futures are made vivid and actionable (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018). However, IBM alone does not determine the racialised structures shaping opportunity. Critical race theory highlights how policies and everyday interactions are structured to normalise athleticism whilst marginalising intellectual potential (Bimper, 2017). Bringing together the three shows

how institutional valuations, identity processes and racialised power work.

Literature Gap

A consistent understanding of Black boys’ career aspirations is limited in past research. The media represented successful athletes and their privileged lifestyles. However, they do not connect this misrepresentation with the perception of Black boys (Hextrum 2020; Sobande et al., 2019). Research on education shows how structural inequities arise. However, insufficient analysis has been done on how institutional barriers combine with media-driven discourse to shape identity (Marsh & Walker, 2022; Cruz et al., 2021; Castro et al., 2024). Research on community issues has looked at parental advocacy as well as racial literacy, but primarily treats family, school, and media as separate systems rather than components of a social ecology (Bryan et al., 2020; Ellison & Solomon, 2019; Gray et al., 2020). These conceptual divisions limit explanatory depth. This research explores how various factors work together to shape the career goals of Black boys.

Methodology

This research adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, where social reality is viewed as constructed through subjective meanings and interactions. Focusing on how young Black boys understand their educational and occupational futures requires an emphasis on lived experiences more than objective measures. With regard to understanding the intersections of identity, aspiration, and race within the educational context, interpretivism prioritises the ‘meaning of the world as experienced by individuals’ (Trangbæk & Cecchini, 2023). Although some critics assert that interpretivism is not generalisable, this study prioritises contextual comprehension over predictive statistics, which is consistent with research targeting subjective depth rather than facts and figures (Bednarek, 2024). Adopting an inductive qualitative methodology helped to provide subjective reasoning, which is necessary for comprehending the untheorised

ways the media, schools, and communities configure aspirations at structural levels. Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest inductive thematic analysis is the best approach for the study of subjective experience that is power and identity-driven. Concerns about the replicability of inductive approaches are addressed through reflexive analytic documentation (e.g., memos, coding logs), as outlined by Tracy (2018). This, in turn, enhances the rigour of the analysis.

This investigation utilises a basic qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews, to obtain rich, interpretive data. This approach is prevalent in the literature on racially situated experiences, identity construction, and the inequities in education systems (Collins & Cannella, 2021). Consequently, semi-structured interviews provided the necessary uniformity across participants to discuss sensitive topics, such as expectations around race and systemic barriers, while also offering the necessary flexibility. A sample of 10–12 participants was used to conduct a qualitative, solicited, in-depth analysis, and to align with the literature, which indicates that saturation is approximately reached in that range (Guest et al., 2020). The qualitative field has gained significant insight by providing ample description and analytic clarity, lessening the critique and transferability concerns surrounding small sample sizes (Tracy, 2018).

Conducting 45–60-minute interviews allowed participants to articulate the educational experiences that shaped their communities and influenced their career aspirations. Purposive sampling, as a sampling strategy, focuses on participants most likely to provide meaningful information relevant to the research question, and as a result, it may expose the research to sampling bias. However, the diversity of experiences, and thus partially mitigating this limitation, was achieved by recruiting from different community settings.

Ethical concerns, particularly those related to minors discussing sensitive and, in this case, racialised issues, were of primary importance to the study. In line with the ethical guidelines established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), consent was obtained from parents, and assent from the youths. These were anonymised using pseudonyms, and they

were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. To lessen power differences, the interviews were held in spaces that were comfortable for the youth. Participants were briefed on confidentiality procedures and limits in safeguarding cases. The researcher maintained reflexive awareness of positionality and remained aware that qualitative research on racialised issues requires sustained attention to power, bias, and interpretative responsibility.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected not by ease of procedure, but rather due to its epistemological fit. In other words, this type of analysis is more aligned with qualitative research, which foregrounds interpretation rather than mere categorisation. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that reflexive TA allows the researcher to interrogate how meaning is made rather than how it is reported, making it suitable for studies on culturally and racially shaped aspiration. The transcripts were inductively coded, and no line was coded as a mechanical task but as part of an active, reflective process. This method shows criticism against thematic analysis that cautions against the transformation into a descriptive sorting (Nowell et al., 2017). To be transparent and trustworthy, the theme development included challenging assumptions, being conscious of power relations, and practising reflexivity in defining the analysis. Coding frequency did not identify any preferences; analytic decisions were informed by how the narratives worked within larger structural and cultural contexts. Such a critical approach ensured that the themes reflected patterns of varied meanings associated with racialised experiences, rather than mere repetition.

Results

Thematically analysed, three interdependent themes have been revealed, demonstrating the way in which media narratives, school systems, and community expectations are combined to influence the aspirations of Black boys. The themes were developed through inductive methods based on the interview data, after which they were connected to known research on race,

youth identity and educational inequity. The findings reveal that cultural discourses that glorify athletic accomplishment, along with the institutional and societal pressures, reduce the opportunity space and heighten the stress on a sports-oriented identity.

Theme	Subthemes	Description
1. Media-Driven Construction of Athletic Identity	Glamourised career fantasies; public celebration of sports over academics	How media, social validation, and community rituals elevate sports and hip-hop dreams as “the number one career aspiration,” overshadowing academic pathways.
		How school practices, low expectations, and systemic racism leave boys “ill-prepared,” “disengaged,” and structurally funnelled toward athletics.
2. Schooling, Structural Inequality, and the Marginalisation of Academic Possibility	Racialised expectations; weak academic support; institutional neglect	How community norms reward athletic identity, while programs like B.A.S.E. attempt to re-centre the balance between academics, sport, and life skills.
		How distorted perceptions of opportunity; peer pressure; emerging holistic alternatives
3. Community Expectations, Identity Pressures, and Pathways Toward Balanced Futures	Distorted perceptions of opportunity; peer pressure; emerging holistic alternatives	How community norms reward athletic identity, while programs like B.A.S.E. attempt to re-centre the balance between academics, sport, and life skills.
		How distorted perceptions of opportunity; peer pressure; emerging holistic alternatives

Theme 1: Media-Driven Construction of Athletic Identity

One of the most important discoveries was the role of sports media in the development of the careers of young Black boys. One of the participants replied, “I play basketball every day for 3-4 hours. I work on my game”, which displays the motivation media discourses can generate. It is unrealistic to expect oneself to become a professional athlete; the vast majority of aspiring athletes never make it (Wilson & Sparks, 2025). Another respondent added that, “The media glamorises sports as a widely attainable way to fame and fortune”, which can be achieved easily. An exclusive emphasis on professional sports narrows the views of Black boys and young men and promotes stereotypes regarding their position in society and Black manhood.

Theme 2: Schooling, Structural Inequality, and the Marginalisation of Academic Possibility

Institutional bias in the school restrains the academic capability of black boys. One of the participants mentioned that at school, they never thought, "In school, they never believed I could do well. They just see me as trouble", which depicts the negativity of expectation in the classroom and how it spoils the involvement of the child. Adams-Bass et al. (2018) pointed out unfair systems within the education system that negatively impacted Black students. The researchers discovered that Black boys are primarily enrolled in lower academic classes, which supports the idea that they favour sports rather than academics (Wittstock, 2022). The other participant said, "Playing sports builds character and promotes teamwork. However, even with talent, only one in a million may be the next Michael Jordan", a point which explains the necessity of fair access to academics and sports.

Theme 3: Community Expectations, Identity Pressures, and Pathways Toward Balanced Futures

The ambitions of Black boys are defined by the expectations of their community. Some of the people who responded to the question claimed

their friends and family highly regard athletics compared to academics. One participant stated that "My family wants me to focus on school, but my friends only talk about who's going to the NBA or rap". Programmes such as B.A.S.E. (Balancing Academics, Sport, and Education) integrate these conflicting values and shift towards academics and sports (Wittrup et al., 2016). One of the participants explained that "The program emphasises that sports can positively affect one's life, but the focus is on the whole student". These programmes overcome the sports-oriented culture, motivate Black boys to set professional goals of various kinds, and promote a healthy interest in academic diligence and sports performance.

Discussions

This research investigated how the influence of the media, the educational system, and community expectations form the career aspirations of Black boys. The results are described concerning the three objectives of the study: (1) the influence of media and culture on the formation of career aspirations, (2) the impact of racism within the educational system on educational disengagement, and (3) the influence of community and kin on the narrative of the career continuum. The subsequent chapters present research that critiques and identifies gaps in the aforementioned categories.

The initial aim was to establish the impact of media and sociocultural variables on the career ambitions of Black boys. Findings revealed that the presentation of Black masculinity by the media, particularly in sport, is influential in career expectations. Sports are always prominently advertised as the primary choice for boosting mobility, while other academic or career opportunities are minimised. To a great extent, black boys are digesting this media-focused story of athleticism. According to Harper and Simmons (2019), these types of representations limit the perceived career paths.

The focus of the media on sports and the non-recognition of intellectual achievements distorts the perception of black boys of their value. Celebrating athletic success over academic achievement helps solidify a narrow concept of success within society. Adams-Bass et al. (2018) demonstrate that this sport orientation replaces

other career interests. The media's focus on stories of success only goes further in reducing the horizons of Black boys to the notion that any future in sports or entertainment is the only option left. Such results point to the significance of media literacy. Assuming that Black boys can view critically what authority depicts in the media, they would probably expand their understanding of what success entails to a broader range of occupations, not only sports. The first objective of the study is achieved by demonstrating the influence of media and cultural factors on Black boys' career aspirations, which tend to be concentrated on sports and entertainment. The pursuit of academic careers is essentially driven to the margins.

The second objective examined the impact of systemic racism embedded in the educational framework on the disengagement of Black boys. Results showed that Black boys regularly not only encountered the 'lower tracks of the academic hierarchy' but also received 'racially discriminatory discipline' and 'low expectations' from their teachers. This correlates with Adeyemo (2022) describing 'education debt' as the structural inequity in schools that hinders the academic achievement of Black students. This disengagement stemmed from the inadequate support and the sense of disengagement that disproportionately lower expectations cultivated among the study participants.

Disciplinary disparities compounded this form of bias in education. Black boys experience harsher discipline and are more likely to be punished for minor infractions. This punishment disparity only serves to perpetuate the stereotype of Black boys as more disruptive and as having lower academic capabilities (Ellison & Solomon, 2019). Such tracking in academics and punitive discipline serves to direct Black boys into sports and sport-centred programmes that further exclude them from academically challenging material and limit their other academic and career options. Cruz et al. (2021) discuss similar findings, arguing that practices such as tracking and punitive discipline disengage Black boys from school. This bias in the educational system diverts Black boys from academic involvement and towards sport as their more probable route to success. The uncompensated absence of biased discipline

policies should provide an academic focus for Black boys as a form of engagement. The study demonstrates that the disengaged complexion of systemic racism in education serves to disengage them. The study illustrates how constructed bias in academic tracking, discipline, and expectations immensely limits the academic opportunities and disengages Black boys.

The third goal investigated the influence of community and familial narratives on Black boys' career aspirations. The analysis reveals that academic performance is expected by families, whereas the community views sports as the primary avenue to success. Community and peer pressure, along with family conflicts, also cause tension. Although families attach importance to education, peers and the community mainly influence Black boys to discover the sporting world as the sole and most feasible path to success. Robinson (2024) discovered that norms within the community, which are historically and culturally shaped, can affect the engagement of Black boys in school. They can beat the temptation to pursue academic ambitions, but then they get criticised or more insults when they venture into academia. Programmes like B.A.S.E. (Balancing Academics, Sport, and Education) are a good example of a balanced system, as they combine academic and sporting activities (Wittrup et al., 2016). They also do not focus solely on education but on sports as well; both highlight the idea that there are various ways to succeed.

The study demonstrates that Black boys who volunteer with mentors and other community programme participants as role models enlarge their career objectives. These activities can undermine the notion that sports represent the sole viable profession to pursue. The third goal of the study is also achieved because it outlines the role of community and family discussions in influencing the career goals of Black boys. Whereas families tend to insist on academic success, community requirements are centred on sports. The young people will be restricted in their choices in the future. Nonetheless, partnership programmes such as B.A.S.E. strive to bridge this divide by rewarding both athletics and good grades.

This research highlights the need for responsive teaching and assistance frameworks for Black

boys. Holistically engaging and affirming instructional practices help combat systemic bias. Bias integration affects educational outcomes (Ellison & Solomon, 2019). Professional development aimed at fostering critical empathy will assist educators in identifying processes of inequitable and often concealed, systemic inequity structures that contribute to differential Black boys' achievement. Furthermore, the B.A.S.E. programme, aimed at Black boys, specifically the community-focused component, should be expanded to include a comprehensive Success approach. These primarily focus on Black boys' athletic development, which is career-expanding (Bryan et al., 2020). Black boys need programming that fosters critical engagement with media concerning portrayals of Black manhood, allowing them to counter negative representations and broaden aspirations (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Most importantly, educational equity access policy shifts must prioritise ensuring Black boys have access to athletic careers and advanced academic work so that they are routinised in high-level academic work for other careers.

Conclusion

This study explored how Black boys construct aspirations within the prevailing context of heightened sports success and limited academic opportunities, a context where Black boys are predominantly viewed through the lens of sports. Across different themes, the analysis surfaced the ways in which personal experiences, family aspirations, and the context of community and the media intersect with dominant cultural narratives in shaping the future orientations of the boys. The analysis captured the considerable structural constraints, demonstrating that Black boys' aspirations are not solely passively imposed from the outside; instead, they are actively interpreted, resisted, and renegotiated through identity work and cultural meaning. The ubiquitous nature of sport and the school systems that default in affirming the intellectual work of Black boys, however, limits the range of possible futures the boys envision. This study also examined the constructive role of parents and mentors as integral frames of holistic support that counterbalance adverse community perceptions and help widen the boys' range of possibilities. By

intertwining structural conditions with lived experience, this work also demonstrates that there remains the question of personal accountability, an equally important variable, alongside the level of institutional accountability to be addressed in reshaping the educational and career pathways of Black boys. This study focuses on the formation

Limitations and Future Studies

The study draws on a single source, limiting the range of potential viewpoints. While single-account data offers depth, the generalisation of the findings to Black boys, whose lived experiences differ due to a range of schooling, family, and community contexts, remains a challenge. Qualitative researchers have warned that data with narrow boundaries risks dominant conclusions and reproduces interpretations without revealing contradictions (Tracy, 2018). Additionally, direct participant interviews could enable dialogic meaning-making, which is core to the rigour of interpretive research (Gravett, 2019). Future research should adopt collections of multiple sites and narrative triangulation in interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to enhance credibility. Aspiration studies in longitudinal research could track boys over time to see how aspirations shift with schooling, media, and sports. The outline of these ideas invites additional comparative work over and with other races and among boys and girls to assess whether the described strategies are specific to Black boys or are part of a larger set of structural issues.

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