
Empowering Agency Over Grit: Cultivating Academic Success and Identity Among Black Males Through the A.N.D. Model

Charles Cole, III, Ed.D., MPA

Executive Director

The Agentic Institute

While the absence of grit has been promoted as a major explanation for the lack of academic success among Black males, such an emphasis is misguided, perpetuates negative stereotypes, and suppresses the intellectual development of those it purports to help. This paper advocates for a holistic framework of agency specifically for Black males that addresses structural barriers such as socioeconomic issues, racial biases, and institutional inequalities. Drawing from the qualitative studies and lived experiences of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, psychologist Wade Nobles, and author and poet Maya Angelou, combined with the oral histories of three academically successful Black males—two African American and one Barbadian diaspora—who earned doctoral degrees despite systemic obstacles, this study presents the A.N.D. model (Awareness, Navigation, Duty). Despite meaningful cultural differences in their family backgrounds and community contexts, all three participants demonstrated remarkably similar patterns of agency development. The A.N.D. model employs culturally responsive pedagogies that foster understanding of personal and communal histories, promoting an educational environment where Black males can thrive. By replacing the deficit conception of blaming academic underperformance on a lack of grit, this approach challenges the inadequacies of the grit narrative and provides a substantive framework that enables educators to empower Black male students across diverse cultural contexts to achieve educational success and personal growth.

KEYWORDS: Agency, Black Male Students, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Critical Consciousness, Educational Equity, A.N.D. Model

THE PROBLEM WITH GRIT: WHY BLACK MALES NEED MORE THAN PERSEVERANCE

Angela Duckworth's concept of grit, defined as perseverance and passion toward long-term goals, has become a popular explanation for academic achievement and has been widely adopted in educational policy and practice.¹ Schools across the country have implemented grit curricula, character education programs centered on perseverance, and assessment tools measuring students' grittiness. The appeal is understandable: grit offers an apparently race-neutral, individual-level intervention that promises to close achievement gaps without requiring structural change or additional resources.

However, grit does not address the systemic barriers that Black males face in educational systems structured by racism, economic inequality, and institutional bias. The notion that tenacity alone can transcend these challenges places blame on students for their struggles while ignoring underfunded schools, biased disciplinary practices, and societal stereotypes.² As educational justice advocate Jonathan Kozol argues, American education remains characterized by profound structural inequalities that individual effort alone cannot remedy.³ Black males are disproportionately suspended and expelled, tracked into lower-level courses, taught by less experienced teachers, and subject to lower expectations: conditions that no amount of individual perseverance can fully overcome.

Critically, meta-analysis found the relationship between grit and success to be weak at best, with even weaker effects for marginalized populations.⁴ Recent scholarship on Black male education by scholars Harper, Noguera, and Howard consistently demonstrates that structural and cultural factors, not

¹ Angela L. Duckworth et al., "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087–1101.

² Marcus Credé, Michael C. Tynan, and Peter D. Harms, "Much Ado about Grit: A Meta-Analytic Synthesis of the Grit Literature," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 3 (2017): 492–512.

³ Jonathan Kozol, *An End to Inequality: Breaking Down the Walls of Apartheid Education in America* (Beacon Press, 2024).

⁴ Credé, Tynan, and Harms, "Much Ado about Grit," 492–512.

individual deficits, are primary determinants of educational outcomes.⁵ As historian Ethan Ris documents, the emphasis on individual character as the solution to structural inequality has a long pedigree in American education, consistently serving to deflect attention from systemic reform.⁶ Political theorist Tampio argues that teaching grit can actually undermine democratic education by encouraging students to accept unjust conditions rather than challenge them.⁷ For Black males who face intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and often class, grit interventions fail because they ignore the need for systemic change, community support, and the cultivation of agency. This study offers an alternative: the A.N.D. model (Awareness, Navigation, Duty), grounded in Black males lived experiences of succeeding against overwhelming odds.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses two primary questions: (1) What educational and navigational strategies do Black males impacted by the crack epidemic use to achieve doctoral degrees despite systemic barriers? (2) How do these navigational strategies reflect agency development across diverse positions within the Black diaspora (African American and Barbadian immigrant)? These questions center Black male voices and generate theory from their lived realities rather than imposing deficit-based explanations.

WHY CENTER BLACK MALES: TARGETED UNIVERSALISM AND BROADER APPLICABILITY

This study centers Black males, not to suggest inherent deficiency, but because educational outcome data consistently positions Black males at the most challenging end of achievement, discipline, and life outcome measures.

⁵ Shaun R. Harper and J. Luke Wood, "Advancing Black Male Student Success from Preschool through PhD," in *Advancing Black Male Student Success from Preschool through PhD*, ed. Shaun R. Harper and J. Luke Wood (Stylus, 2016), 1–14.; Tyrone C. Howard, *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms* (Teachers College Press, 2010); Tyrone C. Howard, *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms* (Teachers College Press, 2010).

⁶ Ethan W. Ris, "Grit: A Short History of a Useful Concept," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 10, no. 1 (2015): 1–18.

⁷ Nicholas Tampio, "Teaching 'Grit' Is Bad for Children, and Bad for Democracy," *Aeon*, February 2, 2016, <https://aeon.co/ideas/teaching-grit-is-bad-for-children-and-bad-for-democracy>.

When institutions and interventions are designed to support those who face the greatest structural barriers, the resulting frameworks often prove effective for broader populations—a principle scholars have termed targeted universalism⁸ or what disability justice advocates call the curb-cut effect.⁹ Just as curb cuts designed for wheelchair users benefit parents with strollers and travelers with luggage, educational strategies developed to dismantle the most entrenched barriers rarely fail those with fewer obstacles to overcome.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AGENCY AS CRITICAL, CULTURAL, AND COLLECTIVE

This study conceptualizes agency not as individual willpower but as a culturally grounded, structurally informed capacity to understand, navigate, and transform oppressive systems. This conception synthesizes three theoretical traditions.

Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's critical consciousness (*conscientização*) provides the foundation for understanding how marginalized groups develop awareness of systemic oppression and capacity for transformative action.¹⁰ Freire argued that education is never neutral—it either domesticates people to accept existing power structures or liberates them to challenge injustice. Critical consciousness develops through praxis: the iterative cycle of reflection and action in which learners come to understand their social position and develop strategies for transformation.¹¹

Psychologist Wade Nobles's African psychology provides essential grounding in cultural identity as a source of strength and resilience.¹² Nobles challenged the Eurocentric assumptions dominating psychology, particularly the emphasis on individualism and competition, arguing that African-descended

⁸ John A. Powell, Stephen Menendian, and Wendy Ake, *Targeted Universalism: Policy and Practice* (Othering & Belonging Institute, 2019).

⁹ Angela Glover Blackwell, "The Curb-Cut Effect," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 15, no. 1 (2017): 28–33.

¹⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 1970).

¹¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 35.

¹² Wade Nobles, "African Philosophy: Foundations for Black Psychology," in *Psychological Factors in Poverty*, ed. V. L. Allen (Markham Publishing Company, 1976), 57–72.

peoples operate from fundamentally different cultural premises emphasizing collective identity and communal responsibility.¹³

Author and poet Maya Angelou's autobiographical work demonstrates how personal narrative becomes a tool of resistance and self-affirmation for those systematically silenced.¹⁴ Throughout her serial autobiography, Angelou transformed experiences of racism and trauma into sources of wisdom and strength, illustrating how telling one's story constitutes an act of agency.¹⁵

The A.N.D. model extends these frameworks by specifying three interrelated dimensions—Awareness, Navigation, and Duty—that emerged from analyzing how Black males who achieved doctoral degrees developed agency throughout their educational journeys. Unlike grit, the A.N.D. model recognizes that agency for Black males must be simultaneously personal, cultural, and political.

METHODOLOGY

This comparative case study employed oral history methodology to explore the navigational strategies of three Black men who achieved doctoral degrees despite growing up during the crack epidemic which devastated urban Black communities from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s. It created unprecedented challenges, including heightened violence, mass incarceration, family disruption, and resource depletion in already underserved neighborhoods.¹⁶ Case study design allows in-depth examination of complex phenomena within real-world contexts,¹⁷ while oral history honors African storytelling traditions and centers participants' voices.¹⁸

¹³ Wade Nobles, *Seeking the Sakhu: Foundational Writings for an African Psychology* (Third World Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Random House, 1969).

¹⁵ Dolly McPherson, *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* (Peter Lang, 1990).

¹⁶ On violence and community impact, see Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, 2nd ed., *Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); on mass incarceration, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2010); on the crack epidemic's broader effects, see Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, "Crack in the Rearview Mirror: Deconstructing Drug War Mythology," *Social Justice* 31, no. 1/2 (2004): 182–199.

¹⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 6th ed. (Sage, 2018).

¹⁸ A. A. Z. Osei-Tutu, "Developing African Oral Traditional Storytelling as a Framework for Studying with African Peoples," *Qualitative Research* 23, no. 6 (2023): 1497–1514.

Participants: Three Black men (pseudonyms: Antwan, Donald, Demarcus) born between 1980 and 1982 grew up in urban communities impacted by the crack epidemic and earned doctoral degrees (Ph.D., Ed.D., J.D.). Two participants are African American; one is first-generation Barbadian American (parents from Barbados). All three grew up in poverty, experienced significant socioeconomic barriers, including food insecurity and housing instability, came from single-parent or disrupted families, and attended underfunded public schools. The three participants came from different cities that were among those most severely impacted by the crack epidemic:

- Antwan grew up in Richmond, California
- Donald grew up in Oakland, California
- Demarcus grew up in Brooklyn, New York (specifically the Canarsie neighborhood)

These three cities—Richmond, Oakland, and Brooklyn—experienced sharp increases in violence, incarceration rates, and family disruption during the crack epidemic years. Brooklyn’s Canarsie neighborhood, where Demarcus grew up, had a substantial Barbadian and broader Caribbean immigrant population during the 1980s and 1990s, making it a critical site for understanding how Caribbean immigrant values intersected with crack epidemic realities.

Demarcus’s Barbadian American background is crucial to understanding diversity within Black male experiences. Including his perspective reveals how immigrant values, particularly the “upward mobility culture” common among voluntary Caribbean immigrants, intersected with the racialized realities of growing up Black in America during the crack epidemic. This diaspora dimension strengthens the A.N.D. model’s applicability across diverse Black populations, demonstrating that while cultural frameworks may differ (African American intergenerational knowledge of American racism versus Caribbean immigrant optimism about meritocracy), the need for critical awareness, strategic navigation, and community commitment remains consistent.

Sample Size Justification: The decision to conduct in-depth case studies with three participants rather than a larger sample aligns with established qualitative research principles. As educational researcher Robert Stake argues, case study research prioritizes depth over breadth, seeking rich

understanding of complex phenomena rather than statistical generalization.¹⁹ Qualitative methodologist Robert Yin notes that three to five cases provide a sufficient basis for pattern identification and theoretical development in comparative case study designs.²⁰

More critically, this study's purpose is theory-generating rather than theory-testing. The A.N.D. model emerged inductively from deep engagement with participants' narratives, a process requiring the extensive interview time (six to eight hours per participant) and analytical attention that would be impossible with larger samples. The three cases provide sufficient variation (two African American, one Barbadian diaspora; three different cities; varied family structures) to demonstrate the model's robustness across different contexts while maintaining the analytical depth necessary for rich theoretical development.

Furthermore, seminal qualitative studies in Black male education have similarly employed small, purposive samples to generate influential theoretical frameworks.²¹ The goal is not statistical representativeness, but transferable insights that help educators recognize similar patterns in their own contexts and apply the A.N.D. framework appropriately.

Data Collection: Each participant engaged in three semi-structured interviews (ninety to one hundred twenty minutes each) conducted either in person or via video conference. Interviews explored family background, childhood experiences during the crack epidemic, educational journey, navigational strategies, cultural identity development, and sense of community responsibility.

Analysis: Following educational psychologist Virginia Braun and researcher Victoria Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis²² and Yin's case study strategies,²³ analysis involved immersion in transcripts, line-by-line coding, theme development within each case, cross-case synthesis, theoretical

¹⁹ Robert E. Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis* (Guilford Press, 2006).

²⁰ Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*.

²¹ For examples of influential qualitative research on Black male education employing purposive sampling approaches, see Harper and Wood, "Advancing Black Male Student Success"; Howard, *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools*; Noguera, *The Trouble with Black Boys*.

²² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

²³ Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*.

integration, and model refinement through member checking. The three A.N.D. dimensions emerged from recognizing that themes clustered around developing critical understanding (Awareness), acquiring navigation tools (Navigation), and maintaining community commitment (Duty).

Ethics and Positionality: All participants provided informed consent. As a Black male who navigated similar structural barriers to doctoral attainment, the researcher brings an insider perspective that enables recognition of cultural nuances often invisible to outside observers. Much scholarship on Black males has been produced by researchers who do not share these lived experiences, resulting in analyses that frequently miss the subtleties of code-switching, community obligation, and the daily negotiations required to maintain identity while pursuing academic success. This insider positionality, while requiring ongoing reflexivity, constitutes a methodological strength.

FINDINGS: THE A.N.D. MODEL OF AGENCY

Analysis revealed three interconnected dimensions of agency that all participants developed despite meaningful cultural differences.

AWARENESS: DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF SELF AND SYSTEM

All three participants developed critical consciousness—understanding that academic challenges stemmed from systemic inequality rather than personal deficiency, coupled with awareness of their cultural strengths. However, pathways differed based on family background.

African American participants typically received explicit racial socialization. Antwan, who grew up in public housing in Richmond during the height of the crack epidemic, described how his mother directly named structural injustice: “My mother would explicitly name the racial and economic injustices that shaped our community, helping me understand that my academic struggles were not personal failings but rather the predictable outcomes of systemic inequality. This awareness became a form of armor, protecting me from internalizing deficit narratives while simultaneously motivating me to pursue educational advancement as an act of resistance.”

Donald recalled a Black teacher in Oakland who provided critical consciousness through cultural affirmation: “She introduced me to African and African American history beyond the limited narratives typically offered in mainstream curricula. She deliberately connected academic concepts to African cultural frameworks, helping me see my heritage as a source of intellectual strength rather than deficit. The experience transformed my relationship to education.”

Barbadian diaspora participant Demarcus arrived at critical consciousness differently, reconciling his family’s immigrant optimism with racialized realities: “My family truly subscribed to the belief of the American Dream, that if they kept their heads down and worked hard, they could build the type of life they wanted. But I experienced tension between these immigrant values, ‘put your head down and work hard,’ and the racialized realities I encountered in predominantly white educational spaces. I had to manage not only anti-Black racism but also the gap between my family’s expectations and the barriers I actually faced.”

Despite different pathways, all three developed dual awareness of systemic barriers and personal/cultural assets, what they termed armor, cultural grounding, or critical hope.

NAVIGATION: ACQUIRING TOOLS AND SUPPORT FOR INSTITUTIONAL SUCCESS

All participants required strategic navigation support: mentorship, strategic school selection, code-switching skills, peer networks, and institutional knowledge. Demarcus’s trajectory in Brooklyn illustrates how a single mentor can redirect an entire life course. In elementary school, he was frequently disciplined for behavior that teachers perceived as disruptive. A Black woman named Ms. Robinson saw something different: “A Black woman named Ms. Robinson told my mom that I needed to get tested. I think my mother probably assumed that something was wrong with me, but she was like, you actually need to test him for a gifted and talented program. When I did the test, my IQ scores were high, so I ended up going to a different school. And the same kinda behavior I used to get in trouble for, was now what was encouraged.”

Later, when Demarcus was nearly expelled for excessive absences, counselor Ms. Simon offered a pivotal second chance: “It might have been an interesting form of reverse psychology, but it felt like the first time in a long time I ever had a choice. Something flipped. I went to summer school and made up the classes I failed.”

In college, when Demarcus’s activism jeopardized his financial aid, Dean Urtz intervened: “She noticed how much of the white faculty lacked support for me or the other students of color standing together in protest. She didn’t have to step up, but she did. She knew how to navigate the financial aid system and made an appeal on my behalf that saved my college career.”

Antwan emphasized developing code-switching with consciousness, adapting language and presentation while maintaining a critical understanding of power dynamics and refusing to internalize the dominant culture’s negative assumptions about Black males.

DUTY: MAINTAINING COMMITMENT TO SELF AND COMMUNITY

All participants maintained responsibility to their communities even while pursuing individual achievement. African American participants framed duty within Black struggle traditions. Donald explained: “Education has always been about more than individual success in our community. It’s about continuing the work of those who fought for us to even be in these spaces, and it’s about making sure the next generation has it better. I can’t just take my degree and leave everybody behind—that would betray everything that made my education possible.”

Barbadian diaspora participant Demarcus emphasized responsibility to his immigrant family: “My family sacrificed everything to be here, to give me opportunities they never had. My grandmother cleaned houses for years to bring family over. My mother worked multiple jobs while going back to school. I can’t waste that. And I need to make sure other Bajan kids see that this is possible, that you don’t have to lose your culture to succeed.”

Antwan offered a crucial clarification: “I’m not ‘giving back’—that language is wrong. I’m not separate from my community such that I’m giving back to something external. I’m part of my community, and this work is how I live my values. It’s not charity; it’s who I am.”

THE A.N.D. MODEL: INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

Agency developed through the interplay of Awareness, Navigation, and Duty. These dimensions were mutually reinforcing. Critical consciousness enabled strategic action; mentorship and support provided tools to act on consciousness; commitment to community gave purpose and prevented cultural disconnection.

What the narratives of Antwan, Donald, and Demarcus do not fully convey is the cost of their success. Each man described exhaustion, hypervigilance, and moments of profound isolation, which scholars have termed racial battle fatigue.²⁴ They succeeded, but not without scars. The constant code-switching, the need to prove themselves repeatedly, the weight of representing their families and communities—these exacted a toll that grit frameworks never acknowledge. When we celebrate Black male achievement without naming this cost, we inadvertently normalize suffering as the price of success. The A.N.D. model does not eliminate these challenges, but when educators and institutions take responsibility for fostering Awareness, supporting Navigation, and honoring Duty, they remove weight from the shoulders of Black males who currently carry it alone.

APPLYING THE A.N.D. MODEL: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITIES

A note on proficiency: The A.N.D. model is not a substitute for rigorous academic instruction—it creates the conditions under which such instruction can be received and applied. As educator Lisa Delpit argues, well-intentioned educators sometimes emphasize identity affirmation and student-centered approaches while failing to explicitly teach the skills and codes of power that students need to navigate dominant institutions.²⁵ Identity without proficiency leaves students affirmed but underprepared. Proficiency without identity leaves students skilled but disconnected. The goal is both. Black males deserve to graduate with strong cultural identity, critical consciousness, and the reading, writing, mathematical, and analytical skills to pursue any

²⁴ William A. Smith, Man Hung, and Jeremy D. Franklin, “Racial Battle Fatigue and the MisEducation of Black Men: Racial Microaggressions, Societal Problems, and Environmental Stress,” *Journal of Negro Education* 80, no. 1 (2011): 63–82.

²⁵ Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

path they choose, without paying for their success with their well-being. The A.N.D. model insists that these are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing ones. The following recommendations draw on broader scholarships on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy.²⁶

FOSTERING AWARENESS

Educators should pursue curriculum transformation that centers Black intellectual traditions and explicitly addresses structural racism. This means more than adding a unit during Black History Month. It requires fundamentally reorienting what counts as knowledge—teaching the Harlem Renaissance alongside the European Renaissance, examining mathematical contributions from Africa and the Islamic world, and analyzing literature by Black authors as canonical texts rather than supplementary readings. Critical literacy instruction should teach students to identify how power operates in texts, institutions, and policies—skills that transform passive consumers of education into critical analysts of their own schooling.

Asset-based approaches should identify and build upon students' existing cultural knowledge and community resources. Critical race theorist Tara Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth provides a useful framework, identifying aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital that marginalized students bring to school but that schools often fail to recognize.²⁷ Educators can conduct asset mapping exercises with students and families, identifying strengths that can be leveraged for academic success.

Schools should create identity affirmation spaces where students can process experiences of racism and affirm their worth among peers. For Black males, this might include affinity groups facilitated by culturally responsive educators—spaces that are academically rigorous, not therapeutic retreats, where critical consciousness develops through examination of history, current events, and students' own experiences.

²⁶ Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (1995): 465–91.; Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2012): 93–97.

²⁷ Tara J. Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 69–91.

Awareness also requires honest assessment of one's own academic standing. Critical consciousness, applied to one's own education, means knowing exactly where you are—what you can do, what gaps exist, and what proficiency requires. This is not deficit thinking; it is strategic clarity. Delpit reminds us that failing to teach Black children the explicit skills they need, while white middle-class children learn them at home, is not progressive; it is negligence dressed as respect. Students should understand grade-level proficiency standards, know where they stand relative to those standards, and have concrete plans for closing any gaps. Black males deserve educators who hold high expectations and provide the support necessary to meet them. Awareness without this dimension risks producing students who can critique systemic racism but cannot read the documents that perpetuate it.

SUPPORTING NAVIGATION

Schools must develop structured mentorship programs pairing Black male students with culturally responsive mentors who provide both validation and strategic guidance. Effective mentors recognize the potential that others miss, possess and share institutional knowledge, affirm cultural identity, and use positional power to open doors. Mentorship should be formalized, not left to chance encounters, with regular meeting times, clear expectations, and training mentors on culturally responsive practice. Programs should recruit mentors who reflect students' backgrounds and can speak authentically to the navigation challenges Black males face.

Explicit institutional knowledge of instruction should demystify the hidden curriculum—tracking systems, course selection, college admissions, financial aid, and self-advocacy. Many Black males and their families lack access to the insider knowledge that affluent families take for granted. Schools can offer workshops, create resource guides, and train counselors to proactively share this information rather than waiting for families to ask the right questions.

Institutional reforms are equally essential. Equitable discipline policies should eliminate exclusionary practices that disproportionately remove Black males from learning environments. Universal access to advanced courses should replace gatekeeping that tracks Black males into lower-level classes. Counseling ratios should allow for meaningful relationships, not just administrative processing. These reforms ensure that navigation support is not undermined by institutional barriers.

CULTIVATING DUTY

Service-learning should emphasize reciprocal relationships and systemic analysis rather than charitable saviorism. Students should engage with communities as partners, not as problems to be fixed. Projects should include critical examination of why service is needed, connecting individual action to structural analysis. This approach transforms service from resume-building into an expression of collective responsibility.

Leadership development through student organizations and youth participatory action research empowers students to identify problems in their schools and communities and advocate for change. When Black males conduct research on discipline disparities, course access, or resource allocation in their own schools, they develop both critical consciousness and practical skills for challenging injustice. This is Duty in action—using education as a tool for collective benefit.

Counternarratives should frame success as a resource for collective liberation rather than individual escape. Schools can invite Black male alumni to share how they use their education to serve their communities, host intergenerational dialogues between students and community elders, and create projects where students document the history and assets of their own neighborhoods.

BEYOND SCHOOLS: COMMUNITY IMPLEMENTATION

The A.N.D. model is not limited to formal schooling. Historically, Black communities have cultivated agency through families, churches, civic organizations, and community-based mentorship long before, and often despite, schools.

Community organizations can foster Awareness through cultural programming that teaches young people their history and develops critical consciousness. This might include African-centered rites-of-passage programs, community education workshops on systemic racism, or intergenerational storytelling that connects young people to family and community history.

They can support Navigation by connecting youth with mentors who possess institutional knowledge and by creating networks where strategies for success are shared across generations. Fraternal organizations, professional associations, and church networks have long served this function—what

schools now call social capital; Black communities have always called looking out for each other.

They can cultivate Duty by embedding young people in intergenerational communities of purpose where achievement is understood as collective uplift rather than individual escape. When young people see adults using their education and professional success to serve the community, they learn that Duty is not an abstract value but a way of life.

Schools would do well to partner with these community institutions rather than attempt to duplicate what Black communities have always done.

CONCLUSION

The inadequacy of grit lies in its individualistic focus and failure to address systemic barriers. The A.N.D. model offers an alternative grounded in the lived experiences of Black males who succeeded against overwhelming odds. This study's inclusion of both African American and Barbadian diaspora participants reveals that while cultural differences shape how families approach education, common patterns emerge: all faced anti-Black racism, all required culturally responsive mentorship, all developed strategic navigation, and all maintained community connections.

Educators must understand what is at stake. The Black males in this study did not simply overcome obstacles; they absorbed them. They carried the weight of systemic racism while pursuing degrees, maintained family obligations while navigating institutions never designed for them, and protected their sense of self against constant assault. This is not resilience to be celebrated. It is harm to be prevented. The A.N.D. model offers institutions a way to share this burden. When schools cultivate critical consciousness, students no longer bear sole responsibility for making sense of their marginalization. When mentors provide navigation support, students no longer fumble alone through systems designed to exclude them. When communities of purpose are built, students no longer feel they must choose between success and belonging. The question is not whether Black males can endure—they have proven they can. The question is whether we will continue to demand that they do.

While this study centers Black males specifically, the A.N.D. model's core insight—that agency requires awareness of structural barriers,

strategic navigation support, and connection to purpose beyond individual achievement—may prove applicable to any population facing systemic marginalization. Educational interventions designed for those encountering the most formidable barriers have historically benefited all students.

The stories of Antwan, Donald, and Demarcus demonstrate that academic success for Black males requires more than grit. It requires critical consciousness, culturally specific affirmation, strategic navigation support, and commitment to collective well-being. Educational institutions embracing the A.N.D. model can move beyond deficit narratives and become spaces of genuine empowerment, spaces that no longer ask Black males to pay for their success with their well-being.

Limitations: With three participants who achieved doctoral degrees, findings are not generalizable but offer transferable insights. The study examines race, gender, and class intersectionality but not sexuality or disability. Retrospective accounts are subject to memory reconstruction. Future research should examine Black males who did not achieve doctoral success, test the model through intervention research, and conduct longitudinal studies.

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