

# Facing Identity Conflicts, Black Students Fall Behind

by NANCY SOLOMON



Enlarge

Nancy Solomon

Students discuss stereotypes in Melissa Cooper's sociology class at Columbia High School in Maplewood, N.J. Looking at pictures of people and guessing what they were like, students said a Latino-looking man looks like a "drug lord" and a white man in a suit looks smart.

November 1, 2009

text size **A A A**

*Second in a series about the minority achievement gap in schools*

The identity issues facing middle-class black and Latino teenagers might be a clue as to why they don't do as well academically as their white and Asian counterparts, some researchers and educators say. The teens often live in dual worlds: the suburban one they live in, and the rougher street life they see glorified in the media.

Known as the "minority achievement gap," the lower average test scores, grades and college attendance by black and Latino students have long perplexed researchers. Many have focused on the values and attitudes of students and whether black students think doing well in school

is "acting white."

## Stereotypes And Students' Self-Image

Columbia High School sociology teacher Melissa Cooper begins class by projecting a collage of faces onto a screen and asking students what they would think if they saw these people walking down the street. The students say the Latino-looking guy is a drug lord. The white guy in a tweed suit is smart.

"How does he look like he's smart?" Cooper asks.

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"He got glasses on," a student says. The other students laugh.

they have about themselves.

Cooper, 32, is African-American and has been teaching for 10 years at this Maplewood, N.J., school, which is roughly 60 percent black and 40 percent white. She pushes her students to challenge stereotypes — even the ones

"Class, do I look like a sociology teacher?" Cooper asks her students. The class responds with a resounding "No!"

"If I would see you walking down the street," one student says, "I would ask you, like, how much you do perms — because you probably work at the beauty salon."

Cooper later laughs at the comment. "It's very interesting," she says, "because it all speaks to how they imagine themselves. You know, because sometimes people who are just like us are our mirror, what we're capable of."

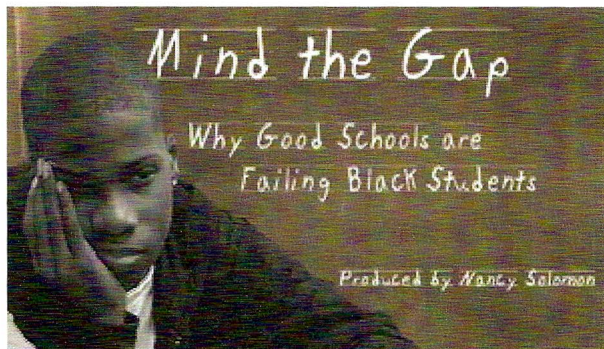
### 'Authentically Black?'

According to Cooper, racial stereotypes are so powerful that black children are much more limited in how they see themselves, even in a place like Maplewood, which is largely middle-class.

"It's a freedom that white children have that black children don't have," she says. "They get to pick from this huge array of personality types, behaviors, authentic selves that they can put on and take off. There is a challenge for black children in terms of, when they go to the identity closet, how many options of what guise they can put on and take off, and still be considered authentically black."

This question of black teenagers and their identity is a clue to the mystery of why middle-class black students aren't keeping pace with white and Asian students. Middle-class black students do just as well as their white peers in elementary school, but as they become teenagers, they begin to fall behind. Pedro Noguera, sociology of education professor at New York University, says middle-class black children have the same benefits of middle-class white children— two parents at home, lots of support and extracurricular activities — but many of them desire to be more like poor children.

"In many black communities, it is the ethos, the style, the orientation of poor black kids that influences middle-class black kids in ways that [are not] true for middle-class white kids," Noguera says. "Most middle-class white kids don't know poor white kids."



Courtesy of Nancy Solomon

Reporter Nancy Solomon spent last year as a Spencer Fellow in Education Reporting to examine why good suburban schools are failing black students. Click the photo above to access Solomon's hourlong radio documentary on the topic.

recommendation of his teacher.

"During fifth grade, I just felt like I didn't have any friends, so I tried to fit in," Keith says. "I started doing less work — always with my friends, always in the back, playing around and stuff like that."

Keith's mom, Angela Gunnings, and his stepdad, Michael Elder, moved from Brooklyn, N.Y., to New Jersey partly because they wanted him in a suburban school. But his grades continued to plummet.

### 'I Used To Be The Geek'

But middle-class black children know, and are often related to, poor black children. And, of course, they are influenced by media images that glorify the rough-and-tumble street. This can cause a lot of confusion for children, especially as they become teenagers.

"I used to be the geek," says student Keith Cordy.

"Used to be the geek in the class, always raising my hand like teacher's pet."

Keith was 14 and flunking ninth grade last year. But he had skipped first grade at the



"I noticed the change from him being this young, sweet, listen-to-mama's boy, to all of a sudden developing a swagger, if you will," Elder says. "That's not always the right swagger to develop. I tell him all the time: 'We're trying to save your life, essentially.' "

Gunnings and Elder say they've done everything they can to help Keith. They've met with his teachers, bought him study guides, punished him and sent him to summer school. But they're up against larger forces, especially since they live at the intersection of two worlds. Walk out their door and to the left is an affluent suburb; to the right is Newark — poor, urban and black.

"And a lot of the kids, from what I can see, want to identify and want to be down and want that street credibility," Elder says. "And they know they can get it by crossing the imaginary border — or the border as it is, you know."

So, when a youngster like Keith walks into class late with his pants sagging, sits in the back and doesn't participate — he is basically striking a pose.

### Peer Culture Vs. School

Prudence Carter, an associate professor of education at Stanford University, studied 70 low-income black and Latino students at a New York school and disagrees with the idea that black kids think doing well in school is "acting white." Instead, she says minority students are conforming to a peer culture that gets in the way of forming good relationships with teachers or feeling part of a school community.

"Those baggy pants, I may not like them necessarily, I might think you shouldn't show your underwear, but it doesn't have anything to do with what's going on in that kid's head," Carter says. "And unfortunately, we have policed and outlawed and denigrated those kids' styles to the point where they have become disillusioned or become defiant — like, 'How dare you?' "

Some children, Carter says, negotiate between these two worlds. They are popular with the poor black children, and they do well in school. She says those children should become the model.

Carter also says schools should train adults to help students straddle the conflicting worlds of peer culture and the classroom — including addressing issues such as how children dress, speak or act in class — so they can help students navigate classroom expectations.

If schools helped minority students with these sorts of relationships, Carter says, they could become active, engaged participants without having to give up their cultural identity.

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## < Facing Identity Conflicts, Black Students Fall Behind

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Heard on Weekend Edition Sunday

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November 1, 2009 - JACKI LYDEN, host:

Researchers and educators have long puzzled over the so-called minority achievement gap. The term is often used to characterize the lower average test scores, grades and college attendance rate by black and Latino students compared to their white counterparts.

Reporter Nancy Solomon spent time at a suburban New Jersey high school, where she examined what some consider to be the causes of the disparity. She has this report.

Ms. MELISSA COOPER: All right, so, you ready to start sociology?

Unidentified People: Yeah.

NANCY SOLOMON: Columbia High School teacher Melissa Cooper begins class by projecting a collage of face shots onto a screen and asking students what they would think if they saw these people walking down the street. The students say the Latino-looking guy is a drug lord. The white guy in a tweed suit is smart.

Ms. COOPER: How does he look like he's smart?

Unidentified Child #1: He got glasses on.

(Soundbite of laughter)

SOLOMON: Cooper is African-American, 32 and she's been teaching for 10 years at this Maplewood, New Jersey school, which is roughly 60 percent black and 40 percent white. She pushes her students to challenge stereotypes, even the ones they have about themselves.

Ms. COOPER: Class, do I look like a sociology teacher?

Unidentified People: No.

Unidentified Child #2: If I see you walking down the street, I would, like, ask you how much you do, like, perms and touch-ups and stuff. 'Cause I'd be, like, you probably work at the beauty salon and then ½

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. COOPER: You have beauty salon. It's very interesting, because it speaks to how they imagine themselves. You know, 'cause sometimes people who are like us are just our mirror, what we're capable of.

SOLOMON: Cooper says racial stereotypes are so powerful that black kids are much more limited in how they see themselves, even in a place like Maplewood, which is largely middle-class.

Ms. COOPER: You know, it's a freedom that white children have that black children don't have. They get to pick from this huge array of personality types, behaviors, authentic selves that they can put on and take off. There's a challenge for black children - when they go to the identity closet, what guise they can put on and take off and still be considered authentically black.

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SOLOMON: This question of black teenagers and their identity is a clue to the mystery of why middle-class black kids aren't keeping pace with white and Asian students. Middle-class black students do just as well in elementary school, but as they become teenagers, they begin to fall behind.

Pedro Noguera, sociology of education professor at New York University, says middle-class black kids have the same benefits as middle-class white kids  $\frac{1}{2}$  two parents at home, lots of support and extracurricular activities  $\frac{1}{2}$  but many of them want to be more like poor kids.

Professor PEDRO NOGUERA (Sociology of Education, New York University): Because in many black communities, it is the, kind of the ethos, the style, the orientation of poor black kids that influences middle-class black kids in ways that's not true for middle-class white kids. Most middle-class white kids don't know poor white kids.

SOLOMON: But middle-class black kids know, and are often related to, poor black kids. And, of course, they're influenced by media images that glorify the rough-and-tumble street. This can cause a lot of confusion for kids, especially as they become teenagers.

Mr. KEITH CORDY: I used to be the geek, used to be the geek in the class, always raising my hand. Like, the teacher's pet.

SOLOMON: Keith Cordy was 14 and flunking ninth grade when I met him, but he had skipped first grade at the recommendation of his teacher.

Mr. CORDY: During fifth grade, I just, like, felt like I didn't have any friends, so I tried to fit in. I started doing less work  $\frac{1}{2}$  always with my friends, always in the back, playing around and stuff like that.

SOLOMON: Keith's mom, Angela Gunnings, and his stepdad, Michael Elder, moved from Brooklyn to New Jersey partly because they wanted Keith in a suburban school. But his grades continued to plummet.

Mr. MICHAEL ELDER: And I noticed a change from him being this young, sweet, listen-to-mommy boy, you know, to all of a sudden, you know, developing a swagger, if you will. That's not always the right swagger to develop. And I tell him all the time, we're trying to save your life, essentially.

SOLOMON: What have you tried to do to help him?

Ms. ANGELA GUNNINGS: What haven't we tried to do?

SOLOMON: They've met with his teachers, bought him study guides, punished him and sent him to summer school. But they're up against larger forces, especially since they live at the intersection of two worlds. Walk out their door and to the left is an affluent suburb, to the right is Newark  $\frac{1}{2}$  poor, urban and black.

Mr. ELDER: And a lot of the kids, from what I can see, want to identify and want to be down and want that, you know, that street credibility. You know, so they, and they know they can get it by crossing the imaginary border  $\frac{1}{2}$  or the border as it is, you know.

SOLOMON: So, when a youngster like Keith walks into class late with his pants sagging, sits in the back and doesn't participate  $\frac{1}{2}$  he's basically striking a pose.

Professor PRUDENCE CARTER (Stanford University): I think that's the trap that many minority kids have fallen into.

SOLOMON: Prudence Carter of Stanford University studied 70 low-income black and Latino kids at a New York school and disagrees with the idea that black kids think doing well in school is acting white. Instead, she says minority kids are conforming to a peer culture that gets in the way of forming good relationships with teachers or feeling part of a school community.

Prof. CARTER: Those baggy pants, I may not like them necessarily, I might think you shouldn't show your underwear, but it doesn't have anything to do with what's going on in that kid's head. And unfortunately, we have policed and outlawed and denigrated these kids' styles to the point that they've become disillusioned or become defiant  $\frac{1}{2}$  like, how dare you?

SOLOMON: Some kids, Carter says, negotiate these two worlds. They're popular with the poor black kids and they do well in school. She says those kids should become the model and schools should train adults to help kids straddle the conflicting worlds of peer culture and the classroom - even about how kids dress, speak or act in class.

Prof. CARTER: And how you adapt in that situation so that you don't feel so completely overwhelmed or insecure, because I think that's what happens oftentimes with kids, particularly the ones who are trying to figure out how do I say to a teacher I want to be here or thinking, I know I'm supposed to be here, but the way you're handling this is making me ashamed.



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SOLOMON: If schools helped minority students with these sorts of relationships, Carter says, then they could become active, engaged participants without having to give up their cultural identity, or what some students call acting white.

For NPR News, I'm Nancy Solomon.

(Soundbite of music)

LYDEN: Visit [NPR.org](http://NPR.org) for audio slideshows and more reporting on the achievement gap.

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Recent First



**Heather Saur (HSaur)** wrote:

Thank you, Lisa. That was the best answer I've had to wondering about that problem. As a white, female teacher, I want to be part of the solution, but I have had some very bad interactions with black teachers, and black parents that have left me feeling helpless and frustrated. From the parent who says "we hit our kids, we yell, that's our culture" and the black teacher who burts into tears every time the issue of race comes up, so it becomes an issue that no one can talk openly about. I don't want to be paternalistic, I don't want to be insensitive, but as someone who knows something about child development, I should have some credibility even if I am white when I comment on issues about education and child development. Everyone has something to say about education, even if they have never studied child or family psychology. And yes, people who know nothing about it, who try to make short off-hand remarks about fixing it by pointing blame, should spend some time in a classroom first.

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**Colin Purrington (cpurrin1)** wrote:

I'd love to hear a story that examines the "tracking" issue at all-black schools. Or all-white schools. Ideally, both, and how they compare. Parents of gifted kids are a really vocal bunch, and I suspect they quickly arm themselves with pitchforks and rakes whenever their spawn are deprived of a challenging education. Parents of kids at the bottom have their own stash of menacing garden tools, too. And then there are the parents of the average kids -- parents who feel that all the attention is sucked away by the profoundly dumb and the off-the-charts brilliant. When race and poverty are added to the mix, the tension must be rather high (understatement of the century).