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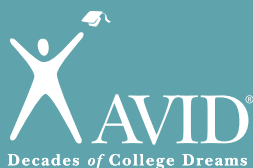
Editor: Steven Baratte

Assistant Editor: Roz Hafner

Graphic Design: Jill Dickens

Contributors: Steven Baratte, Karl Debro, Jill Dickens, Cheryl Gaffney, Rob Gira, Dennis Johnston, Jeff Popp and Catherine Simmons

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AVID Center
5120 Shoreham Place, Suite 120
San Diego, CA 92122
Phone: (858) 623-2843
Fax: (858) 623-2822
www.avidonline.org

An Interview with Donna Ford

By Rob Gira

AVID Executive Vice President, National Programs

Award-winning professor, author, researcher and lecturer, Dr. Donna Y. Ford is well respected for her work focused on gifted education and multicultural/urban education.

Dr. Ford is Professor of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University. She conducts research primarily in gifted education and multicultural/urban education. Specifically, her work focuses on (1) recruiting and retaining culturally diverse students in gifted education; (2) multicultural and urban education; (3) minority student achievement and underachievement; and (4) family involvement.

Her background makes her the perfect choice as a keynote speaker at the Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African-American Male Achievement, an AVID and College Board joint conference in November.

Recently Dr. Ford spoke to us about her insight into African-American male achievement issues.

Recent AVID data and national data indicate that we are not serving our African-American male students well, whether we are talking about high school graduation rates or college acceptance rates. What are the main factors in this situation?

When we look at the big picture, as a global society at large, I don't care what country you are talking about, Black males are demonized. They are often presented in the media and viewed as lazy, socially deviant, violent, aggressive, unintelligent, and more. As Carl Upchurch says in his work "Convicted in the Womb," we often have in our heads these stereotypes, and the worst are put on Blacks in general and Black males in particular, where they are typically seen as dysfunctional. Further, our low expectations are reinforced by the news and other forms of media. More specifically, Black boys learn to see themselves as "bad" and rarely think of themselves as academics. So, when programs like AVID or AP are recruiting students, Black males rarely see themselves as AVID or AP material. We must give them an image of a Black male as one who is an intellectual, one who reads and who is academic. We can have great teachers from all backgrounds—Black or White—and great programs like AVID, but if students don't believe in themselves, they won't achieve and take advantage of these programs and other opportunities inside of school settings.

Dr. Pedro Noguera and others have said that, for young people, the peer group is the most pervasive force. How true is this, and how might we better engage the peer group for our Black male students?

Without question, the peer group is powerful, especially for adolescents. When Dornbush and Brown did their study on the influence of peer groups, they found them to be a strong and forceful influence for all groups, but for

African-Americans, this influence was especially strong. The second most influenced group was Hispanics. Both of these groups are very people-, family- and group-oriented; they are often communal or socially interdependent. Thus, they have a harder time separating their identity from their peers. And for teens, popularity is so important. We have learned that, for Black males, when they associate with a group that gives them esteem, they are hooked and feel valued and understood because they find rejection in too many other places.

You and others have argued that U.S. schools are more segregated now than ever. How has this happened?

Gary Orfield has just published a huge volume on this issue, and he notes that we are even more segregated than before the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954. This is tragic, to say the least. Unfortunately, we still see suburban parents who don't want their children educated with minority students. And what I have argued is that gifted education is even more segregated than education in general. This has not occurred by accident. We use tests, along with policies and procedures that exclude many students and are not defensible. This spills over into AP, of course. There is indeed a crisis here, and it is even more troubling when you examine participation in gifted education and AP classes by gender. In gifted education, a Black girl will be referred before a Black boy, even if he is doing better. As far as teacher practice, I can observe teachers for 15 minutes and see differences in how students are seated and how teachers talk to them. Too frequently, Black boys are at the bottom of the rung as far as positive interaction with teachers go. There are always exceptions, but the norm seems to be that Black, and even Hispanic, males do not have enough positive



Dr. Donna Y. Ford

experiences in school and enough positive relationships with their teachers. These relationships are vital – all students learn best from teachers they like and respect and from teachers who like and respect them.

You have written extensively about the negative results of “deficit thinking,” particularly as it applies to Black male students. What is the impact of this?

I think deficit thinking is definitely at the core of all our social and educational ills. Nothing is having a more negative impact. With negative stereotypes and biases, there is no way to have high expectations. When you see a child or group as deviant and dysfunctional, there is no way to see them as gifted. For example, if your expectations are low for Black males, if you are fearful of and intimidated by them, how can you see or appreciate their potential and strengths? Several studies indicate that teachers, unfortunately, under-refer Black students for gifted education screening and AP classes. One of my favorite sayings is that “the less we know about each other, the more we make up.” Deficit thinking exists and persists because so few of us have been prepared to work with culturally diverse students; likewise, few of us have received training in gifted education. This is a double

whammy, so to speak. We truly need assistance to help decrease our biases and stereotypes so that they don't hinder us being effective educators and advocates for our students.

Black students and other diverse students who achieve at high levels are often accused of “acting White.” How does this occur and what are the implications?

This is one of the results of deficit thinking and is particularly prevalent in low-income communities. When a Black student does well and is considered studious, he is often accused of “acting White” by other Black students. When you don't see large numbers of Black students doing well, that's often the conclusion. If you are a Black male recommended for AVID, you are going to have a very difficult time. Who wants to face all the rejection and hostility? Ron Ferguson has said that Black kids can handle being called a “nerd,” but being called “White” is another matter. They are seen as being in cahoots with the “enemy” or the “oppressor.” Let's look at it this way, when you are not sure where you fit in or where you belong, you are going to do a cost-benefit analysis, and you will ask, “What will give me the most peace?” One of the saddest pieces of data I have seen was the result of a study a few colleagues and I did with over 1,000 high achieving Black kids. A large percentage of them—over 80%—said they had been accused of acting White. They talked about how they often struggled and wanted to give up. We asked them what it meant to act White and they indicated that number one was being smart, number two was using Standard English, and number three was valuing school. Then, we asked what it meant to act Black. They said, number one was being a

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“thug,” number two using non-Standard English, and number three was hating school. When you are recommending kids for AVID or AP, this has implications for their achievement and desire to participate and stay enrolled. Black students—both boys and girls—experience a fear of failure and fear of success, which is also true for all low-income students. Black women are told, “The better educated you are, the less likely you are to find a mate.” For many Black males, they are afraid that, if they get into AVID and succeed, they might lose their friends. We must unbrainwash our kids, our parents, and our educators to combat this mindset and related fears.

What are some best practices you’ve observed in working with Black male students?

I don’t study programs as much as I study individual teaching practice. First and foremost, when you give deliberate attention to not being colorblind, that’s good practice. When there is staff training in relating to minority students and understanding their world, that’s good practice. When we work on making the curriculum multicultural and relevant, that’s an excellent approach. Disaggregating data and discussing it, that is also important. Of course, it goes without saying that we have to look at both the academic and social needs of students. This focus on the social needs of students distinguishes AVID from other programs. AVID staff are trained to focus on this important dimension and this is so important! I like to say, “Don’t just teach from the neck up, but also from the neck down.” That more comprehensive approach can make all the difference to students.

What about single-gender classes? We are seeing some experimentation in the AVID world with these.

I am so eager to see kids do well, so I think we should look at the single-gender approach. At Vanderbilt, Gilman Whiting and I have created the Achievement Gap Project, to focus on differential outcomes by race and class. We also have started the Scholar Identity Institute where, in the summer, we work with Black male students to change their attitudes about being academics. We work with them for four to five hours per day, focusing on self-efficacy (“you can do it”), self-awareness (strengths and shortcomings), need for achievement being greater than affiliation, and their internal locus of control (taking responsibility for one’s decisions and actions). Interestingly, when we asked the young Black males what the number one thing we could do in schools to help them achieve, they said, “Get rid of the girls.” So, if we ask, students can sometimes tell us what they want and even need to be successful.

How much can a culturally diverse teaching force contribute to closing the gap for Black male students?

That’s a great question. I have looked at the data from Linda Darling Hammond and others, and we have drawn several conclusions. First, having a diverse teacher gives students an immediate cultural connection as well as a role model. Second, research shows that Black teachers can respond more quickly to issues their students have because they often serve as an “insider” or cultural broker. White teachers can do this as

well, thus we must spend a great deal of time working with them. And there may be an advantage to having a male teacher, as Black male students have two borders to cross – gender and ethnicity. We do have a long way to go in diversifying our teaching force. I have looked at teacher demographic data from 2003-04, and 75% of our teachers in the U.S. are female and 70% are White. Only 7.9% of our teachers are Black and 6.1% Hispanic. This does not reflect our population at large and sets us up for lots of cultural clashes. Here is a case in point. We know that female teachers are less tolerant in general of the male student who is active and lively. Boys are often perceived as hyperactive. Without an understanding of how boys learn, teachers suffer and students suffer.

When all is said and done, I believe it is within the capacity of the majority of teachers to be effective with their students, including Black males. However, we must want to be effective and we must believe that this group is intelligent and highly capable to being successful. AVID staff receives formal training to become more culturally competent; this is wonderful, but we cannot and must not become complacent. Our effects to help Black and Hispanic students to achieve at higher levels and in greater numbers must be proactive, aggressive and ongoing. Our children deserve this and so much more.