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Freedom to aspire: Black children's career dreams, perceived aspirational supports, and Africentric values

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ABSTRACT
Black children today fight to define their own futurity beyond the myth of low aspirations – a dominant societal ideology which limits Black success to careers in professional sports and entertainment and blames Black families and communities for devaluing education. Informed by career aspiration research and qualitative methodologies, this study illuminates the career dreams and aspirations of Black children ages 8 to 14 years old enrolled in a summer reading program. Analyses of drawings and interviews from 12 focal children demonstrate how Black youth: 1) articulated career aspirations through Africentric values related to Black self-determination, collective uplift and personal interests; and 2) perceived familial and community support for career aspirations as nurturing relationships, specialized career knowledge, and academic support. The article concludes with a discussion of community-based and education-oriented strategies that honor and expand the career aspirations of Black children.

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Career aspirations; Black futures; Africentric values; Black children; drawings

Introduction

> I have been working with Black and Brown youth for over 20 years . . . .Tragically, the all too familiar question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" often yields an all too familiar response – an athlete or an entertainer. While there is inherently nothing wrong with wanting to be an athlete or entertainer, we as a people are capable of so much more!
>
> Reggie Bachus, *The New York Amsterdam News*

Reverend Reggie Bachus's (2019) words underscore the pervasiveness of the 'myth of low aspirations' (Law, Finney, and Swann 2014, 577) for Black children in America. Like all children, Black youth develop career aspirations, or what psychologists define as 'an individual's point-in-time expressions of educational and occupational goals' (Andreassen 2016, 6). Unlike many other youth, however, Black children develop their aspirations within 'an anti-Black society which implicates all people, structures, and institutions within it' (Coles and Powers 2019, 6). The myth of low aspirations is particularly insidious because it promotes the perception that Black children are intellectually inferior and are therefore more interested in sports and entertainment-related careers rather than 'cerebral' professions like law, medicine, and technology. A key

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premise of the myth of low aspirations emanates from 'a long-standing racist and ill-informed stereotype that blacks are genetically or physically more athletic than whites and that the former are intellectually deficient compared to the latter' (Simiyu 2009, n.p.).

Based on these negative stereotypes, the myth of low aspirations often relegates career success for Black people to sports and entertainment industries, and Black children may begin to narrow their own career goals and dreams to those arenas (Simiyu 2009; Spearman and Harrison 2010). Results from large-scale surveys frequently indicate higher percentages of Black children aspiring to become an entertainer (e.g. musician, rapper) or a professional athlete compared to their white and Asian peers (Muir 2014; Simons 1997). Research suggests that Black children may perceive professional sports and entertainment to be attainable because they are frequently exposed to sports figures and entertainers in the media and in popular culture (Simiyu 2009), while other fields with fewer prominent Black role models – including medicine, law, and finance – may not be perceived as viable options for social and economic mobility (Spearman and Harrison 2010). Given that Black youth perceive sports and entertainment careers as a way to achieve the American Dream, they may pursue these aspirations at the expense of academic achievement (e.g. good grades) and educational goals such as attaining a college degree (Simiyu 2009; Simons 1997; Spearman and Harrison 2010).

Equally problematic the myth of low aspirations blames Black families and communities for their children's 'limited' aspirations. Scholars frequently posit that the 'root of the problems of the black community is black families [who] elect to push their children toward sports career aspirations, often to the neglect and detriment of other important areas of personal and cultural development' (Simiyu 2009, n.p.). Law, Finney, and Swann (2014, 576) further explain,

> much academic discourse on black youth dictates that a general attitude of low aspirations for future career and life trajectories is a hegemonic trait within this group . . . furthermore, it is argued that black culture and family values further feed [their] low aspirational values . . . with little emphasis being placed on education.

Clearly, such sentiments pathologize Black families and communities, signifying that Black cultural values are deficient (Edwards, McMillon, and Turner 2010; Ladson-Billings 2009). Making matters worse, by presuming that the majority of Black children exclusively aspire to sports or entertainment careers, the myth of low aspirations ultimately obscures the career dreams that countless Black youth hold for their own futures, silences their voices, and marginalizes their experiences and life goals. As educators, community members, and parents working to help Black youth define and achieve successful future trajectories, we urgently need more research on Black children's career aspirations because 'beyond the athletic dream, we know little about the career dreams of African American youth' (Parmer 1993, 132).

The purpose of this investigation, then, is to illuminate the career dreams and aspirations of a group of Black children between 8 and 14 years old. Rather than presuming that these children have low career aspirations, or that the majority hold aspirations to play professional sports or become celebrity entertainers, this study offers a space for Black children to freely aspire and to 'imagine themselves as they please' (Dumas and Nelson 2016, 29). Informed by career aspiration research in sociology and

psychology and qualitative methodologies (e.g. drawing tasks, interviews), the study addresses the following questions:

(1) What career aspirations do Black children articulate?
(2) How do Black children describe the aspirational supports that they perceive in their lives?
(3) How do Black children's career goals and aspirational supports reflect Africentric values?

Review of the literature

Black children and the myth of low aspirations

The myth of low aspirations is rooted in racist stereotypes of Black people and culture. During slavery, Black children were 'imagined as chattel and were often put to work as young as two and three years old' (Dumas and Nelson 2016, 33). In contemporary times, Black children have often been portrayed in the media and by society as having diminished futures and limited potential because their culture is (mis)characterized as violent, anti-intellectual, and criminalistic (Coles and Powers 2019; Edwards, McMillon, and Turner 2010; Wise 2002).

These racist characterizations work to subjugate Black children's present lives *and* their futurity. The rhetoric related to the myth of low aspirations is deficit-oriented, signifying that Black youth's career dreams and their future life trajectories are subordinate to the aspirations of white youths and therefore need to be 'boosted' or 'changed' (Bachus 2019; Muir 2014; Simiyu 2009). Comparative studies demonstrate that Black children, especially older youth from lower SES backgrounds, hold more modest aspirations than white children (Bigler, Averhart, and Liben 2003) and are likely to aspire to 'low prestige jobs' where Black people have been traditionally well-represented (Brown and Sergist 2015). In a study of 94 African American children (aged 6–7 years and 11–12 years), Bigler, Averhart, and Liben (2003) found that children as young as six years associated certain careers with white and Black people and accorded higher status to those careers with higher concentrations of white people (e.g. medicine, law). Surprisingly, the children held these race-based career stereotypes whether they were in high- or low-SES families. Over time, Black children perceive certain 'lower-status' professional fields, including social services, government careers, and education as 'safe' or 'appropriate' for future work (Bigler, Averhart, and Liben 2003; Brown and Sergist 2015; Terrell, Terrell, and Miller 1993). Black children may be more likely to perceive professional sports and entertainment as 'safe' careers because they most often see successful Black adults in these fields. The majority of players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL) are African American; however, an NCAA Division 1 male basketball player only has a 1.2% chance of making it to the NBA and 1.6% chance of making it to the NFL (National College Athletic Association 2019). Similarly, while Black actors, actresses, and musicians may seem to be more prevalent, Black people overall are underrepresented in the movie and music industries (Cole 2017). A 2015 study demonstrated that the top 100 films from 2007 to 2014 were exceedingly white, and only 17 had a lead/co-lead played by an actor

from an underrepresented minority group (Cole 2017). The success that Black youth seek in professional sports and entertainment is extremely rare, yet few have a viable backup plan for future success outside of these career fields (Simiyu 2009; Simons 1997; Spearman and Harrison 2010).

Through the myth of low aspirations, Black children are positioned as youths who are unable to articulate, pursue, and ultimately achieve their career dreams for the future because their families and communities do not help them acquire the intellectual knowledge and cultural values privileged by societal institutions. Schools, for example, often reinforce mainstream cultural values (e.g. individualism, competition) and 'normalize the practices and knowledge of the [white] middle and upper middle class while devaluing the knowledge of other groups' (DeNicolo et al. 2015, 3). The myth of low aspirations posits that because Black youth are more likely to drop out of high school, are less prepared for the rigors of college education and career training, and are less likely to attain a bachelor's degree (American College Testing 2016), Black families and communities are 'culturally disadvantaged' and unable to provide their children with access to the types of cultural knowledge and skills that cultivate societal success (Edwards, McMillon, and Turner 2010; Ladson-Billings 2009). Wise (2002, n.p.) further explains the logic underlying the myth of low aspirations in this way:

> lower black achievement in schools reflects the lower value placed on education by the black community, compared to whites or Asians … .educational success is not held in high enough regard by blacks, and … this difference in cultural values explains why whites and Asians score higher on achievement tests, tend to get higher grades, and are more likely to go to college than their black counterparts.

Andre M. Perry (2014), columnist for the *Washington Post*, argues that Black parents' perceived disinterest in education has become 'widespread' and is currently the 'default opinion' of politicians, teachers and administrators, and other community members. Rather than recognizing the systematic inequities and ineffective policies that plague the educational system, Black families and communities are blamed for devaluing education and being unsupportive of their children's career dreams.

Finally, racial disparities in schools and workplaces further promote the myth of low aspirations for Black youth. Simons (1997, 2) argues that 'the notion that black children aspire to excel in sports raises suspicions about the quality of education they receive and also the societal perception of this population.' In other words, some Black youth might aspire to professional sports and entertainment because they are not receiving equitable opportunities to learn in schools (Milner 2010; Wise 2002). Consequently, Black youth may not perceive schools to be places where their futures are nurtured and where their career aspirations are supported. Rendell, an African American teen from Harlem, New York, poignantly recalled how some teachers perceived his academic capabilities and future potential as limited:

> I did school OK, but you start thinkin' on what they said. Like, "You know where you from, don't hope for too much," or … ."College? No, just get ah trade." They never even ask *how* they can help you succeed. Even askin' what you wanna do in life. Those words never came outta their mouth. Now, there were a couple [who cared], but the majority were like "That poor Black kid, he ain't got no chance" or "He just a statistic." They don't think about how that make you feel. (Kinloch, Burkhard, and Penn 2017, 48)

Rendell's words suggest that teachers' low expectations and disregard for Black students' future plans may cause them to internalize negative views about their bodies, their intellect, and their future aspirations. At the same time, racial inequities in the workplace might also mitigate Black youths' career aspirations. Black youth ages 16- to 24- years old often have the highest unemployment rate compared to their white and Latino peers (United States Department of Labor 2018). In addition, Black people are overrepresented in lower paying jobs (Brown 2002) and underrepresented in STEM professions (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), medicine, law and other higher-prestige careers (Lease 2006). In light of the racial discrimination and other barriers in society, Black youth may exclusively aspire to play professional sports or become entertainers because they perceive those industries as the most viable pathways towards social equality, career success, and upward mobility (Bigler, Averhart, and Liben 2003; Parmer 1993; Simiyu 2009; Spearman and Harrison 2010).

Resisting the myth of low aspirations: studies of Black youths' aspirations and cultural ethos

The research presented in this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the myth of low aspirations for Black youth. For example, Law, Finney, and Swann (2014) found that Year 10 (15 years old) Black male and female students collectively aspired to professional careers and believed that education would be important to their occupational futures. Similar to white British students, about 65% of these Black youth aspired to 'white collar' careers. Research in the United States has also demonstrated that Black youths' career aspirations are just as high as their White counterparts (Lease 2006) and they are optimistic about their professional futures (Cheatham 1990).

Studies have also found that strong ethnic and racial ethos may positively impact Black people's professional interests, confidence, and trajectories (Brown and Sergist 2015; Byers-Winston 2010) and may nurture the career aspirations and enhance the career decision-making efficacy of Black children (Rollins and Valdez 2006). Cheatham (1990) contends that Black people's career aspirations are shaped by Africentricity, or culturally relevant values, attitudes, and beliefs inherent to their origins in Africa. Consequently, the career goals that Black youth develop and nurture may reflect Africentric cultural ethos such as interdependence, communalism, respect for elders, and collective affirmation (Boykin 1983; Law, Finney, and Swann 2014; Nobles 2015). Constantine, Wallace, and Kindaichi (2005, 310) explain that

> in line with cultural values that emphasize familialism and communalism, African American adolescents who are in the process of making career decisions might place greater priority on familial goals and community needs (e.g. staying close to their family to provide or obtain emotional or financial support) over individual goals.

In addition to familialism and communalism, Black children's career aspirations may resonate with other Africentric ethos, such as Black self-determination, or the personal control that Black Americans fight to exert over their own social, economic, and occupational futures (Franklin 1992). Expressive individualism, or the development of distinctive personalities that denote a uniqueness of personal style (Boykin 1983), and

educational excellence comprise additional African-centered values that may be reflected in Black children's career goals and interests (Cheatham 1990; Hendricks 1994). Moreover, while Black youth are more likely to perceive and anticipate that their careers will be impacted by racism, Black cultural identity may serve as a protective factor against discriminatory policies and experiences (Byers-Winston 2010).

Finally, research suggests that Black families and communities serve as supportive systems for Black children's career aspirations. Black families and communities highly value education; they want their children to attain postsecondary degrees and skills, and they provide rich knowledge, inspiration, and resources through their cultural lessons and ethos (Anderson 2018; Carey 2016) despite widespread (mis) perceptions that they are hindering their children's career aspirations and life goals. Though they are often misunderstood or marginalized by schools, Black parents actively support their children's academic potential and college-going aspirations through close relationships, cultural knowledge and traditions, and assistance with homework and other school assignments (Edwards, McMillon, and Turner 2010; Carey 2016). Consequently, Black youths' aspirations, their cultural values, and their perceived systems of support may counter career-development models oriented towards Eurocentric ethos and beliefs that privilege competition and individuation (Cheatham 1990; Hendricks 1994).

Methodology

Black children's 'freedom dreaming' as methodological (re)design

In order to render more authentic portrayals of Black children's social futures, Dumas and Nelson (2016, 40) argue that 'researchers … need to fundamentally (re)design empirical studies to explicitly ask [children] … who they are, what they think, and what they desire in their lives.' The current study, then, attempts to refute the myth of low aspirations by explicitly asking Black children to define their career dreams without presuming that they will primarily be sports or entertainment related, and to describe the supports that they perceive in their lives for achieving these goals. In the current research, comparisons between Black and White youths' goals and aspirations are not made, for such comparisons often marginalize and silence Black children's dreams and symbolically chain them to the low expectations, limited success, and unfulfilled destinies emanating from a society defined by white supremacy. Allowing Black children to describe their own career dreams and supports provides the opportunity for them to (re)center their own desires and nurture the 'freedom dreams' (Young, Foster, and Hines 2018, 103) that they hold for their futures.

Consistent with the (re)design of research advocated by Dumas and Nelson (2016), this study highlights Black children's aspirations through their drawings. For Black children, drawings may provide a critical space for visualizing and verbalizing their career aspirations as freedom dreams (Young, Foster, and Hines 2018). Law, Finney, and Swann (2014) utilized drawings as an effective methodology for revealing and examining Black male youths' aspirations. In their study, 10 Black boys attending a summer school program organized by a British university were asked to draw self-portraits and create timelines and relational maps to elicit their aspirations. The interview

data and arts-based work samples comprised an 'integrative mixed methods approach' (Law, Finney, and Swann 2014, 577) that facilitated data triangulation and enabled researchers to identify Black male youths' positive aspirations in their talk (interviews) and through their illustrations (e.g. smiling self-portraits, detailed timelines with educational and career achievements). Moreover, researchers (e.g. McDevitt et al. 2013; Merriman and Guerin 2007) have found that drawings are productive tools for helping culturally-diverse children share their thoughts about abstract concepts like 'career aspirations' because they are 'an almost universal activity of children, which is "fun" for them and does not require strong written or verbal skills for those taking part' (Chambers et al. 2018, 13–14).

Participants, setting, and data sources

Data featured in this article was collected from 37 children between 8 and 14 years old. All child participants were enrolled in 6-week university-sponsored summer programs in 2012 and 2015. The program was designed to remediate comprehension, vocabulary, and phonics-related reading challenges and served children from the local area; about 70% of the children attended public schools, while the rest attended private schools. The diversity in the surrounding communities was reflected in the program: about 70% of the students in the program were Black; 20% were Latino, many of whom had immigrated from El Salvador; and 10% were White. Socioeconomic information was not explicitly collected from the children or their parents, but program files indicated that about 25% of the children received scholarships (worth about $400) to attend in 2012 and about 30% of the children received scholarships in 2015. Moreover, in 2012, the elementary school where the summer reading program was housed was selected as a site for a state-sponsored summer food program, and several children attending the reading program received free breakfast and lunch from that food program.

This study was approved by the researcher's university IRB office. To recruit child participants and obtain parental consent, the primary researcher presented a brief overview of the study, reviewed the parental consent forms, and answered parents' questions about the study. Consent forms were then distributed to the parents; children who returned the signed parental forms were included as participants in the study. Before the drawing sessions and interviews, the children were also asked for verbal assent (e.g. providing a 'yes' or 'no' response) to participate in the study, as directed by the university's IRB office. All children who participated provided verbal assent and had written consent from their parents. In addition, all the children and/or their parents self-identified as African American or Black.

As the primary researcher, I collected data from 20 boys and 17 girls with the assistance of graduate students who worked on a daily basis with the reading program. The graduate students helped the children feel more at ease during the drawing sessions because they were familiar to them. Drawing sessions, which included the creation of the drawings and interviews with the children about their drawings, lasted between 45–60 minutes. We typically worked with three to five children seated around a table, though a few groups were slightly larger (six to seven children). We provided markers, pencils, crayons, colored pencils and 8.5 × 11 inch white paper for children's drawings. During the 2012 drawing sessions, children were invited to create drawings of themselves

working in their career dream jobs. In 2015, we expanded the career dream drawing prompt by asking the children to create (a) a drawing of their dream career, (b) a drawing illustrating how they might use literacy in their dream careers, and (c) a drawing of people supporting their career dreams.

Over 100 drawings were collected across the 2012 and 2015 studies. Both informal and formal interviews with the children about their drawings were also conducted. In the 2012 study, about half of the children's thoughts about and interpretations of their drawings were recorded by the researchers in their fieldnotes, while the other half were engaged in formal interviews that were digitally recorded and later transcribed. In the 2015 study, all of the children were formally interviewed about their career-oriented drawings; the interviews lasted between 20–30 minutes and were professionally transcribed.

Data analysis

As the primary researcher, I independently analyzed the data. Although the graduate assistants were available to collect data during the summer programs, they were not available to assist in the analysis of the data. Given that the drawings were central to this study, Harper's (2015, 148) assertion that visual analysis 'relies heavily on what one chooses to see' was particularly insightful. As a Black scholar, mother, wife, and former urban high school counselor, I am deeply committed to 're-narrating the dominant racial images that write people of color into the story though consistently negative images at best and pathological histories at worst' (Leonardo 2013, 20). Through these multiple racialized positionalities, I looked at the children's drawings not just as artwork, but as visual spaces through which Black children imagine possible futures that radiate hope and resilience through Africentric values (Boykin 1983; Franklin 1992; Nobles 2015) and (re)affirm their humanity and dignity.

To ascertain the children's career aspirations, I carefully analyzed the children's drawings to determine how they visually represented their career goals and the types of work they hoped to do. In this first cycle of visual analyses, I closely attended and coded the visual design elements in the images, including people and objects in the scene, layout, color, and workplace setting/tools (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Next, I verified the accuracy of my interpretations with the children's explanations of their drawings, and with the fieldnotes and initial analytic memos composed by the research teams. This type of triangulation across data sources enhances the rigor and trustworthiness of interpretive findings in qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). From these analyses, I tabulated the various professional industries, specific careers, and the percentages of children aspiring to those careers (see Table 1).

In the second cycle, I followed a similar analytic process to determine the children's aspirational supports. I first analyzed the children's drawings to identify who was in the drawing (e.g. specific family and community members), the nature of their relationship (e.g. smiles, hugging), and the types of support provided (e.g. behaviors). In subsequent rounds of coding, I looked across the drawings and the interview data for emergent patterns and themes related to the supports that they perceived as helping them to achieve their career goals. In the third cycle of coding, I analyzed the interview data and the drawings (when appropriate) with codes related to Africentric ethos and values.

Table 1. Children's aspirational careers.

Occupational Industry	Career	N	Industry %N
Creative Arts Industry	Fashion Designer	1	11%
	Pet Fashion Designer	1	
	Author/Illustrator	1	
	Chef	1	
Community Services Industry	Driver (Taxi/Bus)	2	24%
	Police Officer	3	
	Hair Stylist/Salon Owner	2	
	Jeweler	1	
	Lifeguard	1	
Entertainment	Singer/Dancer	1	1%
Military	Army/Marine/Navy	4	11%
Politics	President of the United States	2	2%
Professional Sports	Basketball	3	24%
	Football	2	
	Cheerleader	2	
	Gymnast	1	
	Sports Announcer	1	
STEM Industry	NASA Scientist	1	27%
	Math Teacher	1	
	Car Mechanic/Customizer	1	
	Pediatrician/Doctor	3	
	Veterinarian	3	
	Architect	1	
Total		39*	100%

*The total N is greater than 37 because 2 students selected more than 1 aspirational career.

For example, I coded for communalism and interdependence (Boykin 1983; Law, Finney, and Swann 2014; Nobles 2015) with words in the interviews that identified specific community members (e.g. coaches, friends), behaviors (e.g. 'helps'), and affect (e.g. 'caring'), or as visual representations in drawings depicting community relationships (e.g. child and friend together).

Based on these systematic analyses, two key themes emerged. First, the children articulated their career aspirations in their drawings and interviews through Africentric values related to Black self-determination, collective uplift and personal interests. Second, the children perceived their familial and community support as nurturing relationships, specialized career knowledge, and academic support that would help them fulfill their career goals. In the next section, I present the drawings and words of 12 child participants to demonstrate these key themes and to represent the types of visual and verbal expressions created by the larger group of participants. The profiles of these focal children are outlined in Table 2; all of the names are researcher-created pseudonyms.

Findings

'Putting my mind on what I want to do in life': Black children's career aspirations, racial uplift, and unique talents

Paris, who aspired to be a pediatrician, asserted during an interview that drawing was important because "I like to draw, and making this picture helped me put my mind on what I wanted to do in life.' In a society where Black children's futures and career destinies are marginalized by the myth of low aspirations, Paris, and the other children in this study, purposefully utilized the drawings to *determine their own career futures*. As

Table 2. Focal participant profiles.

Pseudonym (Researcher-Created)	Age	Gender	Grade level completed	Career dream	Perceived career supports
Aria	10	F	4th	NASA Scientist	Family, Teachers
Darren	10	M	3rd	Architect	Family, Friends
Elijah	10	M	4th	U.S. President	Family
Fatima	12	F	6th	Fashion Designer	Family
Imani	10	F	4th	Entertainer	Family, Other Dancers
Jaxson	14	M	7th	Car Engineer	Family
Katrina	9	F	3rd	Math Teacher	Family, Teacher
Laylah	12	F	6th	Hair Stylist/Salon Owner	Family
Paris	13	F	7th	Pediatrician	Family, Community
Russell	11	M	5th	Basketball Player	Family, Teammates, Coach
Sherrie	8	F	2nd	Cheerleader	Family, Cheer Team, Coach
Tyron	11	M	5th	Author/Illustrator	Family

Table 1 indicates, about 25% of the children aspired to careers in professional sports and entertainment, while 75% envisioned a wider range of possible professional trajectories.

Aspiring to careers for racial uplift

The majority of the children in this study were inspired by careers that enabled them to uplift or help people in their communities. Uplift ideology is 'a complex, varied, and sometimes flawed response to a situation in which the range of political options for African American leaders was limited by the violent and pervasive racism of the post-Reconstruction United States' (Gaines 2018, n.p.). Asante (2018, n.p.) advances a modern-day interpretation of 'uplift as collective social advancement,' urging Black people to 'buy in to the idea that we can use our careers and talents to uplift our community. Now, more than ever, we need to ensure that we are using our chosen career fields to support our community.' Consistent with Asante's interpretation of collective uplift and the Africentric ethos of interdependence, communalism, and cultural affirmation (Boykin 1983; Nobles 2015), many of the children in this study were inspired by careers that enabled them to give back to Black people and uplift their local (or even national) communities. For example, in his drawing, Darren envisioned working as an architect (see Figure 1). Importantly, Darren explained that he wanted to be an architect 'because I'll build houses in my neighborhood … [and] I'll be able to help people who have nowhere to live.'

Darren's drawing illustrated the determination it takes to realize this goal by depicting the design/build process beginning with his role as the architect (left), moving then to his blueprint (middle) and finally to the newly-constructed house (right). Darren explained,

> I have blueprints in my hand because they help us to know the directions for building the house. I made the house on the blueprint so I would know how to make the roof, the door, and everything on the house. And I colored the roof yellow, and the door is like reddish-orange. Then I used black for the window.

Figure 1. Darren's career drawing.

Just like an architect, Darren had given great thought to the design of the house, and this may suggest that he has been aspiring to an architectural career for some time. Moreover, Darren is looking directly out towards viewers and smiling in his drawing, signifying his joy in knowing that his architectural designs are helping people in need of housing.

In Figure 2, Katrina portrayed herself as a classroom teacher, noting, 'I want to be a first-grade teacher. I really like math [and] I really like multiplication.'

Katrina not only wanted to become a teacher because she liked math, but because she wanted to help other children. She explained, 'I want to help kids to learn math and to be good students.' Notably, Katrina's drawing also illustrates the pedagogical practices that she believed would help her students learn math: she has written several math equations on the board, and she expects to develop strong relationships with her students. Katrina

Figure 2. Katrina's career drawing.

depicts herself smiling and directly looking at her students as she teaches, and the classroom environment is student-centered; her students are comfortably sitting on rugs on the floor, and they all have distinct facial features (e.g. hairstyles, eyes, mouths). Like other excellent Black math teachers (Jackson and Wilson 2012), Katrina envisions math teaching as relational, meaning that mathematical content is situated within caring networks in the classroom that offer socioemotional support to students.

Elijah, who was also interested in helping others, envisioned how he would support people as President of the United States in this sketch (see Figure 3).

In his presidential role, Elijah wanted to use his political power for the good of the United States. The largest object in Elijah's drawing is the U.S. flag, symbolizing the President's role in upholding democracy. Further Elijah explained in his interview that he was determined to be a President who prioritized the public good:

> I want to be like President Obama 'cause he makes laws and he helps people. My grandma said that President Obama made a law and now when people go to the hospital they don't have to pay a lot . . . I want to make laws that help people treat each other nice. This is me [in the drawing] giving a speech. I have to give speeches so people know about the new laws I am making.

In addition to these images, an emphasis on community uplift was evident from other children's career dream drawings. Paris (see Figure 4) depicted her work as a pediatrician through patient care, with an image that included her checking on a child lying on an

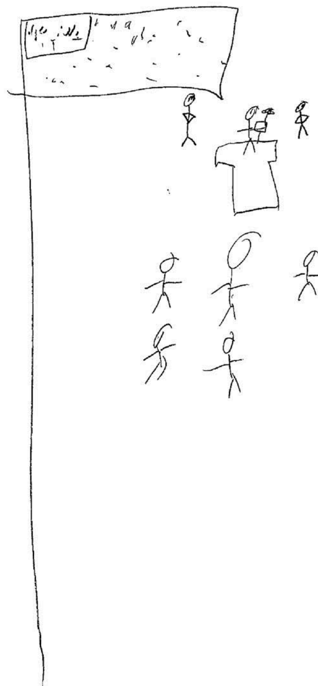

Figure 3. Elijah's career drawing.

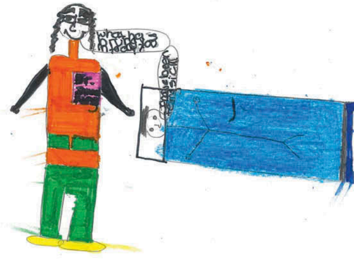

Figure 4. Paris's career drawing.

exam table and using speech bubbles for conversations. She asserted, 'I want to be a good doctor and help children. So I am asking him what's wrong because he's sick. When he tells me what's wrong, then I can give him medicine to make him feel better.'

Finally, Laylah drew her own hair salon, with herself working as the stylist in the middle, to capture her aspirations. The busy scene depicted clients getting their hair shampooed and styled, with closed eyes and smiles indicating the pure bliss they are experiencing. Laylah explained,

> When I was five, I would do my dog's hair. Then I started doing my cousin's hair . . . .now, I want to do lots of different people's hair . . . . I want to give people different styles and colors [and] I want to have my own shop in my neighborhood, so I can help people feel good about their hair.

It seemed that for Laylah, owning a salon that promoted healthy haircare and provided exceptional services was a viable tool for uplifting Black people in her community.

Aspiring to careers that showcase unique talents and personal interests

While collective uplift was a significant career goal for the majority of the children, other participants articulated their career futures through professional positions where they could showcase their interests and talents. In other words, these children aspired to careers that resonated with their *expressive individualism*, or uniqueness in style and talent (Boykin 1983). In Figure 5, Aria's interest in STEM is illustrated in her drawing as a future space engineer/scientist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Aria depicted herself as the central figure in the workplace, using the arrow and the word 'me' to explicitly identify her role as the scientist/designer of the NASA shuttle. Aria noted in the interview that 'I just really like space, and I've liked it since second grade. Last year, we studied the planets and we made models and Jupiter was so big!' Aria's shuttle is clearly an engineering masterpiece. During her interview, she explained that 'I

Figure 5. Aria's career drawing.

wrote the math and science [formulas] on the board because that's the information I used to build the shuttle.' Aria's wide smile and positive affect signal that she is pleased that the shuttle she designed is launching, and she created a number of additional tools, including the yellow and blue satellite and the safety signage, to successfully direct the launch. Interestingly, Aria's 2015 drawing strongly resonates with images in the 2016 movie *Hidden Figures*. Aria's drawing is reminiscent of the mathematical genius and engineering brilliance that three African American women – Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan – displayed in the NASA Space Program, where their efforts as 'human computers' were critical for successful space travel and helped change the course of the Space Race (Shetterly 2016).

Russell dreamed of a career as a professional basketball player in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Russell's drawing depicts his game-winning shot at the three-point line (see Figure 6).

Russell's drawing clearly portrays how his personal interest in the game and his experiences playing on a basketball team combine to shape his aspirations to play in the NBA. His drawing depicts perfect shooting form, with his arms outstretched, feet pointed towards the basket, and fingers extended. In his drawing, Russell wore a jersey with his current team number, his own special color (yellow), and red Air Jordans, signifying his dreams of being 'a superstar' with a strong athletic brand. Russell further explained,

> My dream job is to be a basketball player because I like basketball a lot, I like the game … I can handle the ball and stuff, and I can shoot. I'm good at it. And I can make money … [so] in my drawing, that's me, and I'm shooting a buzzer beater three. I stole the ball and … I had like two seconds to shoot, and I made it.

Personal interests and unique talents were also central to Fatima's career dreams. Fatima dreamed of being a fashion designer (see Figure 7), and the medium that Fatima chose (e.g. colored pencils) gave her drawing the appearance of a page in a sketchbook, enabling her to demonstrate the intricate details of her clothing (e.g. the shirt is off the shoulder,

Figure 6. Russell's career drawing.

Figure 7. Fatima's career drawing.

the skirt has an asymmetrical hemline and has diagonal stripes). Like other aspiring

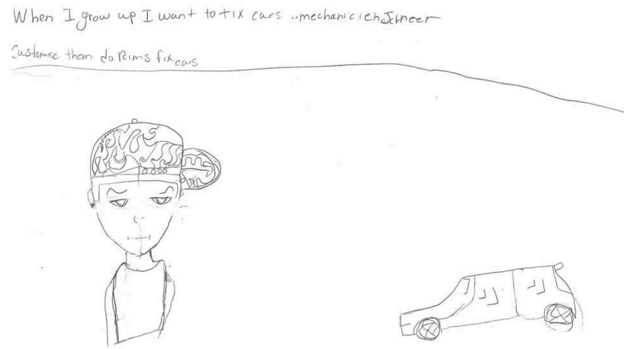

Figure 8. Jaxson's career drawing.

fashion designers, Fatima seemed to understand the significance of sketches, as they represent the visual expression of the designer's vision and inspiration and are often presented as a prototype before the patterns are developed and the clothing is cut and sewn.

When asked why her name was included as a label on her design, Fatima remarked,

> My name is my brand, and I want my name to be really known in fashion. Like, I want to be a designer who makes clothes for famous people like Beyoncé and Kim Kardashian … I really like to sew, and I like the colors and patterns. Fashion is cool 'cause it gives everyone a unique style.

Consequently, Fatima's sketch and its unique design elements, including color (e.g. green, blue, yellow), accessories (e.g. hat), and her designer label (e.g. her name is placed diagonally across the shirt), symbolize the innovation and creativity that she believed to be the hallmarks of her own fashion power house.

Other children envisioned career futures that reflected their personal interests as well. Imani's drawing of herself on stage dancing and singing expressed her aspirations to be a celebrity entertainer

> like Ariana Grande. I want to become a singer because I see people singing on TV and it makes me wanna do that [and] I'll do the Whip/Nae Nae [song and dance by rapper Silento] at my concerts because I'm good at dancing.

Similarly, Sherrie believed that she was 'good at cheerleading' so she aspired to be a professional cheerleader. Jaxson explicated how he visually illustrated his love of cars through his sketch in Figure 8: 'When I grow up I wanna be able to fix cars and customize them. Like, this car is nice and you see the nice rims there. So, I'm looking into in the future to see how my car's gonna look when I customize it.'

Through their vibrant images and words, these children inscribed their own 'freedom dreams' (Young, Foster, and Hines 2018), anticipating futures that they themselves determined and that reflected their goals of collective uplift and/or showcasing their own personal interests and unique talents.

'My family will help me get a good job': Black children's perceived family and community supports for career aspirations

In their drawings and interviews, the children reflected communalism (Boykin 1983) as the support that they attained from deep kinship networks, including immediate family, extended family members, and community members. While drawing a picture of his friend, Darren remarked, 'When I'm an architect, my friend is gonna help me read blueprints because he helps me read in school, and my family can help me get a good job.' Darren's words suggest that he recognized that 'the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts … that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged' (Yosso 2005, 69) in Black families and communities were central to his future success as an architect. More specifically, Darren and the other children perceived three types of support from their communal networks: nurturing relationships, specialized career knowledge, and academic support.

Nurturing relationships in families and communities

Over half of the children created drawings depicting nurturing relationships in their families and communities that cultivated their career interests and goals. As Figure 9 demonstrates, Tyron imagined himself immersed in the creative process, inspired by his own father who served as a main character in his book, *Super Dad*.

Tyron's drawing represents his career as a successful children's author, with the copyright at the bottom indicating that *Boom Boy* and *Super Dad* are his intellectual property. In talking about his drawing, Tyron further explained how his success was supported by his family:

> This is a paper copy of my book, and that's me drawing. I'm coming up with an idea about Boom Boy. He's a boy who woke up and went to school and on the way he saw a magic position that said "Do Not Drink" but he drunk it anyway and it made him go all crazy. Then Super Dad is gonna come over and save him … when I write books I will give them to

Figure 9. Tyson's career drawing.

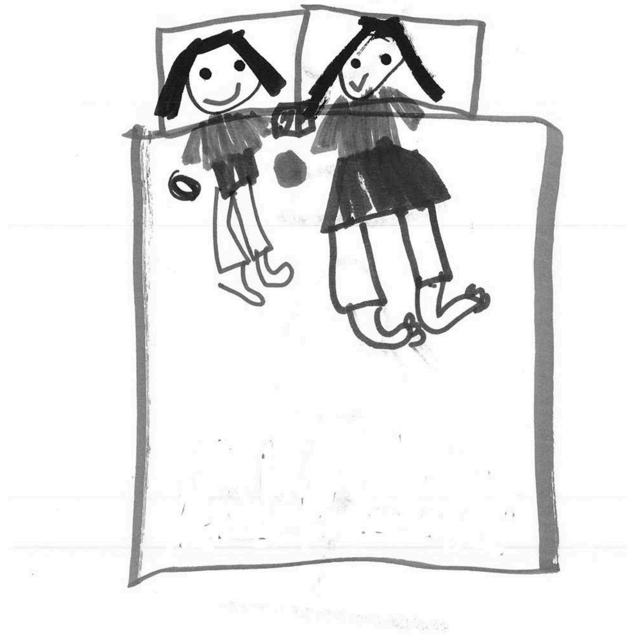

Figure 10. Sherrie and her mom reading in bed.

> my family to read. My Mom and Dad already have read it and they liked it, and my sister and Grandpa, did, too. My whole family can inspire me and give me ideas and they can help me publish my books.

Like Tyron, Sherrie also described how the caring relationship from her family helped her to envision a career as a professional cheerleader. Sherrie's illustration captured her reading in bed with her mother, a favorite pastime in their family (see Figure 10).

When asked why she enjoyed reading with her mother, Sherrie stated,

> I like reading with my mom because she reads all the big words, but she tells me I'm a good reader and she helps me read better. [And] one time my mom read a book about Gabby Douglas, and that book was my favorites 'cause it talked about how she made it to the Olympics and how practiced a lot so she could do all the hard tricks.

While Tyron, Sherrie and other children actually depicted caring relationships with family members, nearly all the others talked about the positive influence that their family and community had on their career aspirations during the interview. Although he did not depict his 'village' in a drawing, Russell (see Figure 5) acknowledged that his NBA career goals were supported by an extended network of family, friends, teammates and coaches:

> To play in the NBA, I need my mom, my dad, my brother, my coach, my teammates and my family. My mom is the one that'll normally be cheering in games and my dad is the one who gives me money every time we win a game. My older brother usually plays against me and

> we get better. My coach is gonna help me get better and tell me how to handle the referees. My teammates pass me the ball so I can score. And my uncle got me interested in basketball and if I make it to the NBA, then he gonna be like, "Yeah, that's *my* nephew!"

Specialized career knowledge imparted by family and community members

Russell's comments not only demonstrate the supportive roles that he perceives his family playing in his NBA career, but they also exemplify the specialized basketball knowledge that his coach, teammates, and brother imparted to him. Other children similarly discussed the importance of the specialized career information, wisdom, and guidance imparted by their families and communities. Jaxson, for example, used his drawing of a customized car (see Figure 8) to illustrate the significant role that his uncle played in his dream of becoming a car mechanic/customizer:

> I didn't draw him here, but one of my uncles knows how to work on cars, and how to fix the engine. Like he knows how to change gears, how to fix the engines to make it fast, and make the paint look good. My uncle learned to fix cars by himself 'cause he had problems with his car. He ended up fixing it himself and now he's pretty good at doing it.

Like Jaxson, Laylah credited her aunt and cousin as supporters of her aspirations to own a beauty shop: 'I always liked to do hair and I would go to my aunt's house and watch her do my cousin's hair. She knew all the colors and stuff and how to make sure your hair didn't fall out. I just started helping my aunt … sometimes she would let me do my cousin's hair, and I really liked that.' In the following exchange, Elijah explained to the interviewer how his family would support his presidential career:

INTERVIEWER: How might your family help you become President?

ELIJAH: Like my mom can help me to read because a President has to read a lot of books.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of books does a President read?

ELIJAH: Books like about wars and battles and the military and how to fight and protect the country. And … Presidents make up new laws, so there's probably books about making laws. So my mom could help me read all those books … [and] my cousins like to read so they can help me because [the books] probably have a lot of hard words in them.

INTERVIEWER: What else can your family help you with as President?

ELIJAH: They could help me with speeches because a President has to write a lot of speeches and talk on television. And you know, his speeches have to be good so people will listen and they'll know what's happening.

With aspirations of becoming a successful fashion designer, Fatima (see Figure 6) noted that her mother would help her 'because she helps me read and she reads the hard words, and there are hard words in some [fashion] magazines.' As an aspiring math teacher, Katrina recognized how her 13-year old sister 'gives me math lessons during the summer and helps me figure out the hard ones [problems] that I don't understand' as a way of helping her develop the necessary content knowledge for effective math pedagogy. Sherrie acknowledged that her mom helped her on her cheerleading squad because 'she was

a cheerleader in high school, so she knows how to do everything. She helped me do cartwheels and round offs, and now we are doing [jumps] like pikes and toe touches.'

Finally, several children recognized the specialized career knowledge that they might acquire from members of their community. Darren noted that his friend could help him learn to read a blueprint as an architect. Paris described her own pediatrician as one person who serves as a source of sound medical advice:

> Other doctors can help you to try to be a really good doctor. A doctor would tell me how to help patients like, "Be careful, make sure to wash your hands when you're touching dirty stuff.' [and] a doctor would tell me, "If you're gonna be a doctor, make sure to go into a good college, and study medical books."

Finally, Imani's drawing in Figure 11, which portrayed her aspirations to be an entertainer, demonstrated how she would learn to sing and perform particular dances like the 'Whip/Nae Nae' from watching entertainers like Ariana Grande on television. She explained that watching other dancers was very important because 'if you don't know how to dance, then they'll teach you the moves.'

Academic support from families

The children in this study valued education, and nearly all wanted to attend college. Even the children like Imani and Russell who hoped to become professional athletes and celebrity entertainers discussed the importance of having a good education, noting that school would help them attain the skills necessary to 'read their contract,' 'write songs' or 'read [basketball] plays.' Paris's drawing of herself in a graduation cap (see Figure 12) with an advanced degree to her hands, resonated strongly with the other children's sentiment about the significance of education in their lives:

In noting that her family 'really wants me to graduate and they help me with my homework,' Paris, like the other children in the study, recognized their families and communities as essential sources of academic support. As an aspiring math teacher,

Figure 11. Imani's career drawing.

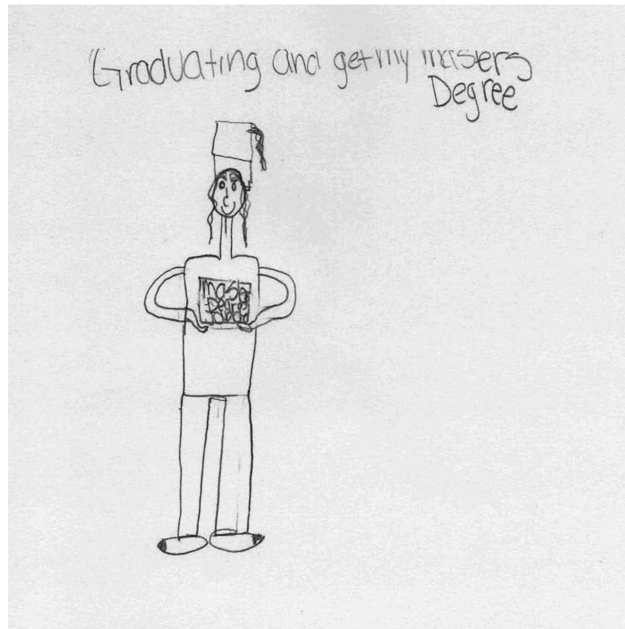

Figure 12. Paris at graduation.

Katrina acknowledged that 'my parents help me with my math homework and learn multiplication.' During the interview, Aria mentioned that her dad was taking her to a computer camp later in the summer and that he helped her with her science projects. Like Sherrie's drawing of her mother helping her to read (see Figure 10), other children described how their parents helped them with literacy skills; Fatima, for example, stated that 'my mom reads with me and she checks that my homework is right' and Elijah asserted that 'my mom helps me with my writing homework and she tells me how to spell all the hard words.' Across these thematic findings, it is clear that the children in this study perceived their families and community members as sources of cultural wealth (Yosso 2005), and their drawings and interviews provided strong examples of Black families and community members as constant sources of caring, academic support, knowledge, and career expertise for achieving their career dreams.

Conclusion

Black people in America have long fought to determine their own futures through 'the freedom to work and think, [and] the freedom to love and aspire' (Du Bois [1903] 2017, 7). Today, Black children are still fighting for the freedom to define their own futurity beyond the myth of low aspirations – a dominant ideology which limits Black success to careers in professional sports and entertainment and blames Black families and communities for devaluing education. Findings from this study work to refute this pervasive myth; as the themes reveal, the majority of Black children participating in this research looked beyond professional sports and entertainment, aspiring to STEM-related careers in medicine, engineering, and architechture, or they wanted to serve their

communities as small business owners/entrepreneurs (e.g. hair salon owner), teachers, and politicians (e.g. U.S. President). Like other researchers have found (Byers-Winston 2010; Cheatham 1990; Hendricks 1994), these children's career aspirations reflected Africentric ethos (e.g. self-determination, communalism, interdependence); they wanted to give back and uplift their own communities, or to engage with professional work that showcased their own unique talents and interests. Moreover, these children perceived their families and communities as essential sources of socioemotional, career-oriented, and academic support that build strong social and navigational capital (Yosso 2005) for Black youth's future success in college and in the workforce.

Clearly, some children in this study did aspire to professional sports and entertainment careers. Rather than labelling these aspirations 'low' compared to white youth, educators, parents, and community leaders should nurture Black children's aspirations in sports and entertainment while at the same time exposing them to different career pathways within those industries. For example, children passionate about professional sports should learn about other career opportunities in this field including sports management, sports journalism, or athletic training (McKay 2018), while youth aspiring to work in the entertainment industry might be interested in working as a publicist, sound engineer, scriptwriter, animator, makeup artist or cinematographer (McKay 2019). Moreover, community organizations and resources that cultivate awareness of careers outside of the sports and entertainment industries are particularly important for Black children's aspirational development. Reverend Reggie Bachus (2019) founded The 400 Foundation, Inc. which provides Black and Brown youth in Harlem with greater awareness of careers in real estate, economic development, and construction, while Spearman and Harrison's (2010) book offers profiles of prominent Black people who exemplify success in a wide range of professions, including medicine, law, journalism, and academia/higher education. Digital resources like Black Girls Code (http://www.blackgirlscode.com/) and Black Men in White Coats (http://www.blackmeninwhitecoats.org/), help children 'see themselves' in STEM career fields where fewer prominent Black role models exist. These types of community initiatives are crucial for expanding the career possibilities of Black children, because they inspire youth to consider different jobs, reinforce the importance of education for future professional success, and offer more accessible career pathways for achieving the American Dream (Simons 1997; Simiyu 2009; Spearman and Harrison 2010).

Given the history of inequitable and ineffective schooling in Black communities (Milner 2010), expanding career possibilities for Black children also requires transformative practices in classrooms. Only two children in this study (Katrina and Aria) mentioned teachers as significant aspirational supports for their dreams. Perhaps this unfortunate reality exists because 'many Black children understand schooling as a space disconnected from who they are' (Coles and Powers 2019, 5). In order for Black children to see schools as sites where their career dreams are nurtured, teachers need to embrace and enact culturally relevant pedagogies. Culturally relevant pedagogies enable teachers to leverage the support of Black families and communities for academic learning; center Africentric ethos for content knowledge development; and sustain students' cultural repertories and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings 2009; Paris and Alim 2014). Through culturally relevant pedagogies, schools can join Black families and communities in supporting Black children's freedom dreaming – inspiring them to learn content that builds an academic

foundation for career success, to give back to their own communities, to affirm their unique talents and to embrace the rich wisdom, expertise, and love of their families.

Finally, the data in this paper reminds us that our research methodologies should ultimately (re)center Black children's voices, perspectives, and experiences, enabling them to imagine themselves and their futures 'as they please' (Dumas and Nelson 2016, 29). In this study, drawings were more than simplistic artwork; rather, they served as visual modalities where the children in this study could 'perform and author new selves that are not only resistant to dominant images but that offer new sites of inquiry and exploration' (Vasudevan 2006, 214). This hopeful imagining of possible futures was particularly highlighted through the children's drawings of professional workplaces where Black people and their contributions might be rendered 'invisible' and/or marginalized (e.g. education, STEM, fashion industry). We know that representation matters: when Black children don't see other Black role models in certain industries, it may make it more difficult for them to perceive these professions as viable career options (Simiyu 2009; Spearman and Harrison 2010). And yet, drawings provided the visual space for Black children to envision themselves in these workplaces – doing their jobs with great expertise and success. In this sense, drawings provide the opportunity for Black children to 'dream freely' – to push back against oppressive myths that (mis)characterize their aspirations as 'low' and their goals as 'limited' and to boldly imagine professional futures and career destinies fulfilled through familial and community support and strong cultural ethos.

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