

The internalized glass ceiling
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Many of us, as Black children, are taught at a young age that we are not expected to perform well in the rooms we enter. We learn, way before we know who we are and how far we can go, that there is a glass wall above our heads. With this experience, many attainable opportunities begin to appear outlandish. This is not an imagined ceiling, but rather a constructed one. A major by-product of systemic racial inequities is the widespread low expectations for Black youth. Expectations expressed in the classroom, over media, repercussions and even in the most basic of conversations. When the message that excellence is abnormal for our youth is repeated, even hard work seems as if it is not enough to turn the tides. In the long run, these lowered expectations often place a strain on self-confidence, limit dreams and may even extinguish the light of black youth. However, through the spread of black youth focused mentorship and learning opportunities, this chain can be broken.

Low expectations have both a psychological and structural effect. These expectations are exhibited in classrooms, conversations and even the media that is consumed on a daily basis. Structurally, it is evident that black youth are facing disproportionate absence from advanced programs, penalization over minor offenses, and underrepresentation in the gifted education programs in schools at varying levels. These facts are not just the results of single personal prejudice; they are systems that constantly act on our black youth, constructions of our past inequities. By sub-consciously believing that a student has less academic ability, teachers, counselors or even administrators can provide fewer opportunities, less support in competitive opportunities, and more harsh reactions to typical adolescent behavior. Consequently, the black youth may begin doubting their abilities, creating psychological barriers.

These factors are often enhanced by the fear of the negative stereotypes being proven correct, which can lead to weaker performance and strengthen the stories that led to the development of said fear in the first place. Outside the classroom, media and community discourses also reinforce these restrictions. Stories of black success are often portrayed as unexpected or even inconceivable results, rather than expected. This exact scenario contributes heavily to the development of the internalized glass ceiling. It creates a mindset of “my goals are unattainable”. Even an adult, who may have the best intentions, can sub-consciously support these confines by encouraging black youth to go along the “safe” or “realistic” path instead of promoting ambitious goals. Over time, this conditioning normalizes low expectations. Due to these factors many youth begin to downsize their own ambitions to fit within the demands of the glass ceiling which acts upon them.

One way to counter this systemic racism by-product is to allow access to more structured, community-based mentoring programs, connecting Black youth with professionals, scholars, and leaders who remind us of our identities and possibilities. As long as youths have a chance to experience the many aspects of Black excellence in various sectors early on, fresh and high aspirations become a reality. Representation alone is not enough to erase the effects of this conditioning, but it is enough to challenge societal constraints and internalized limits. An effective mentorship program can be developed where students are assigned trained mentors in order to set goals, offer support, academic assistance, and introduce them to the workplace and world. Such programs will work alongside the schools, community based organizations and local businesses to be sustainable and accessible. Mentorship should not only be inspirational but also real skill-building and preparation through these schools. Mentors may assist students to apply to scholarships, prepare to study at the next level, interview, learn about the workplace culture, and

tend to the specific needs of their mentored student. Mentoring can be the difference between self doubt and resilience, the glass ceiling and a ladder. Consistency and investment in the community are the keys to the success of a plan like this. The sources of funding can be obtained by collaborating with local companies, local alumni, and charity. In order to allow this program to become accessible to all, it is necessary for it to take place during the school day. The impact of mentorship is greater when it is community involved instead of being seen as a short-term program.

Systemic racial inequities are massive and deep-rooted, but their by-products, like lowered expectations, are not irreversible. Black youth light is not dim; it is bright and will continue to shine as such. Yet even with that, resilience cannot be the only survival tool. Societies should play an active role in destroying the discourses that are limiting the youth and in their place introduce new systems that affirm their unlimited potential. We will not only inspire achievement by deliberately investing into the future of our youth, but we erase their predetermined limits. By doing so we make sure that the glass wall above the heads of our children is not only broken, but completely taken away so that their light can shine without hindrance. We are working towards the substitutions of each and every glass ceiling with a ladder; a ladder made of collective knowledge, responsibility, and faith.