

- *Dr. Streveler: Welcome back to a bonus issue of the Research Briefs Podcast, as we continue our conversation with Dr. James Holly, Jr.*

*James would you like to say a bit more about the work you're doing right now at Martin Luther King, Jr. Senior High School in Detroit, MI.*

- ❖ **Dr. Holly: Yes. So, my current role as an academic interventionist which is a fancy way of saying tutor or teacher assistant, I work with students throughout the day who need help in any subject matter in the high school so any grade level 9-12, whether that be math, science, or social studies, but primarily math given my engineering background and the fact that that's a great need.**

**In addition to that, I coach chess after school and I also coach basketball. And so that gives me a wide range of interactions, not just with black males, but certainly primarily with black males. When people see me, they say, "Can you help me with this?" or, "We need you, we're so glad you're here." I get that a lot. And I'm thankful for that, it tells me that there's a need and I can be immediately useful.**

**How my research helps with what I currently do, initially honestly, I didn't feel like it did. Despite the fact that I studied so much about black males and I tried to find solutions for the problems that I read about. When I got into the school the problems seemed insurmountable. It seemed like there were too many issues that the boys have to navigate at once. It seems like they're further along age-wise and growth-wise but too far behind in their performance levels and social skills. And so, a lot of times it's easy to be**

like, well they just need this back there, they just need this back there and what can we do now? And so, I'm a firm believer in what Frederick Douglass says, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

However, when students who are lacking come, we can't use this as an excuse that they should've gotten it earlier. And so now, what I have to do a lot of times is figure out how to do multiple things at once. So, I can't just instruct students about science and math, or help them figure out this math problem, I have to help them understand integrity, I have to give them a talk about character, I have to help them understand healthy masculinity and the broader value of intellectual development not just getting good grades in school. I have to help them understand how society works and how we're seen while at the same time try not to further discourage them or lower themselves; like lift their self-esteem while also helping them understand that others don't see them as capable and as valuable as I do.

And so, you're juggling a lot of things at once and the Ph.D. helped me gain a scholarly perspective of what the problem is. But what I'm trying to do now is bridge research to practice where I can leverage what's in papers and make it real to see how the solutions that I read about work in this context. How do we get enough time to make the impact that is necessary as an institution? Or, to have a broader impact and not just one student. Or, is it even possible? Maybe I have to focus on that one student, or two students as opposed to trying to impact the whole classroom or the entire school.

So, I have even more questions now being in the field, being in an everyday

context that's chaotic and difficult where it is broken at every level from the societal level, the district level, the school institution itself, and leadership and things like that, to the students and then also with their families and their households, and there's a lot of things in their communities. And so, it's trying to figure out what's a realistic impact that I can have? And how do I maximize that beyond trying to do too much and think too broadly.

So, during the Ph.D. I had to think very broadly where I focused on the general things and now, I have to narrow it down to something more idiosyncratic like one student and his particular needs and his particular struggles and challenges. That's what I'm trying to figure out today.

- *But one of the things you saw with Dr. Calhoun, back in Tuskegee, was how her having faith in you and saying, "You're going to get a Ph.D. one day," made a huge difference to you. And, I'm sure there will be, you know, if we were to go 20-30 years in the future, I'm sure you would find that there would be men that would say, "Well, you know, if Dr. Holly hadn't have said that to me, or believed in me, my life would've been different."*
  
- ❖ *Yes, and I was talking with a friend of mine, who is actually still at Purdue, she's working in a tutoring program that I used to facilitate and that was a conversation we were having is like, "We may not get to see it, but if we continue to encourage them hopefully the students, whether it's a year, five years, or ten years down the road will say, 'Now it makes sense. I'm glad Dr. Holly, or so-and-so was telling me X, Y, and Z.'" Because right now when you're in the thick of it, it doesn't look good and so you're hoping eventually*

*it will click. Or, what can I do next, or what else can I do to try to help the students be in a better position for success really? Not forcing them to do things the way that I want them to do it but coming to their own understanding of what's necessary for their full potential to be realized.*

➤ *Well one thing I know too is the kind of work you're doing is very hard and hopefully the autoethnography also gave you insight into yourself to help you be stronger for this very, very difficult work.*

❖ *The other thing too I should say is in talking about the students a lot too, is unfortunately the students get a lot of the blame. As I said earlier institutions fail young people, particularly black males. And the other side is, that's what I was unprepared for as well is really how to address the broken institutions or be successful in the midst of failed institutions. Because a lot of times the institutional infrastructure can directly contradict, or limit, the potential that you can have, the success you can have in trying to help young men do better and be better. And so, I also want to emphasize not just all of them, but there's a lot of places within the school, how school is done, and how school is run as well as outside the school that even when they're trying to do well, even when they are on the right track can serve as a tremendous barrier to their wellbeing.*

➤ *So, Teresa just gave me the thumbs up.*

❖ **All right. Thank you, guys, that was a tougher question to answer. I wonder about that every day.**

➤ *You know too, as a Ph.D. now, maybe you will have a stronger voice to help some of those policies and institutions. And again, you've only really been graduated for like four days.*

❖ **Right. That's true.**

➤ *And you haven't changed the world yet? What's wrong?*

❖ **Yeah, that's true, let time run its course. That's the process.**

➤ *Yes. It is hard to be patient, yes.*

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