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# “What Works”: Recommendations on Improving Academic Experiences and Outcomes for Black Males

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*This brief presents the most significant recommendations based on a review of key findings from research presented in this special issue. The authors offer what they believe to be the most important considerations of what works for improving Black male school achievement in the domains of research, practice, and policy.*

The works in this special issue have demonstrated the complexity of Black male lives. To that end, there must be thoughtful and intentional efforts to recognize the unique challenges Black males encounter, and most importantly, relevant strategies to minimize adverse consequences associated with those challenges. This special issue has been primarily concerned about what works in supporting Black male academic experiences and outcomes. The work featured in this volume have spotlighted the multiple variables shaping more positive, effective schooling experiences for Black males from the elementary years through college. Operating from an anti-deficit paradigm (Harper & Associates, 2014; Howard, 2014), the scholars in this issue have offered a number of ways to proactively support the academic success of Black males. The following recommendations are derived from the findings of the studies featured in this volume. This brief is intended to offer a simple reference guide to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers concerned with enhancing the quality of schooling for Black males.

## RESEARCH

- Research on Black males must be “humanizing” (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; Paris, 2011; Paris & Winn, 2014). Part of what makes research credible is the relationship researchers have in relation to the participants. The scholars in this special issue humanize the research presented by telling the story of Black males’ resilience and perseverance, not their failures or shortcomings. Researchers must remember that “humanizing research does not end when the study does” (Paris, 2011, p. 147), because the work has longstanding consequences on participants and readers alike in perpetuating narratives of Black boyhood, masculinities, and achievement orientations. We must take special care to tell their stories with the integrity with which they shared them, using innovative methods in authentic social contexts. The papers in this special issue offer strong examples for doing this type of research.
- Emphasize a commitment to understanding institutions, structures, and systems that shape the schooling experience of Black males through their eyes. Leverage young men’s “points of view” in analysis of broader problems. This may include adopting multiple methodologies (*e.g.*, interview, observation, journaling, photo elicitation, action participatory research, etc.). Apply interpretive lenses such as critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2013), for example, that appreciate and foreground participant voice as central to a theorization of their experiences. Seeing school systems through students’ eyes provides a richer, more reliable understanding of structural impediments to learning, cultures of achievement, and opportunities for engagement that impact Black male student outcomes.
- Understand the multiple layers of Black male identity (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991) and academic self-concept. In Flenbaugh’s work, for example, he discusses how identity for Black males is highly nuanced, dynamic, complicated, and increasingly complex. Therefore, it is essential that researchers engaged in work with Black males understand that educational experiences and outcomes are tied to a multitude of life factors, some controlled, some uncontrolled. For example, identity mapping provides a way to delve into the entirety of one’s self-concept. Self concept is made up of many selves; different worlds that are constructed in such a way that some worlds may be more significant to an individual’s self-concept than others. This recommendation is critical in moving beyond static representations or accounts of the lived experiences of Black males.

- The previous recommendation is undergirded by our strong encouragement for more interdisciplinary research projects amongst scholars to deal with problems of Black male school achievement more holistically. The new R.I.S.E. (Research, Integration, Strategy, and Evaluation) initiative for Boys and Men of Color being led by Dr. Shaun Harper, Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity at the University of Pennsylvania is a strong example of this type of forward thinking, collaborative research. Problems as large as Black male school achievement require thought partners across multiple disciplines to offer longstanding solutions.
- A willingness to further interrogate and analyze the role of race in the educational experiences of Black males is crucial. As demonstrated in this issue, research on identifying racial microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) and implicit bias can go a long way in investigating specific challenges that Black males encounter in schools, and coping mechanisms that they develop to usurp such threats to their experiences. Also, it is crucial to recognize that issues surrounding race and racism may not be salient for some Black males, and examining that reality holds credence as well.

### PRACTICE

- High expectations for Black boys must never be compromised based on mere perceptions of their supposed lack of engagement or resilience in school. It is essential for practitioners to resist the notion that Black youth enjoy failure or do not want to be educated (Harris, 2011), because the reality is that Black males indeed care a lot about their schooling (Harper & Davis, 2012). Adults must be made aware that “to promote resilient academic outcomes, efforts must not focus males as perpetrators of bravado attitudes” (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003, p. 625). In other words, regardless of the personas that Black males project, there must be an unwavering commitment to see them as able, human, with unlimited potential to produce at high levels. Displays of “toughness” by Black males should, just as Noguera (2003) suggests, signal the need for a clearer understanding of the processes informing how Black boys experience the school environment and interactions with adults. Raising expectations means adapting the school environment to become places where Black males perceive teachers as sources of support and affirmation, and the curriculum as challenging and relevant (Milner, McGee, Pabon, & Woodson, 2013), similar to descriptions of the teachers by participants in Warren’s article.

- Students' learning greatly benefits from strong student-teacher relationships. Establishing common ground rules, developing subject mastery and care, and reaching out as well as going beyond are each important aspects of relational teaching with Black males, as discussed in Nelson's article. The relational teaching framework (Reichert & Hawley, 2014) and findings in Nelson, Hotchkins, and Warren's work that suggest that there must be a strong commitment by schools to cultivate schooling environments that recognize and appreciate the social interaction styles and cultural preferences of Black males. Establishing a relational school climate is pivotal for producing high academic outcomes for Black males.
- Students must be viewed as whole people, in need of social, emotional, physiological, and intellectual support. This support cannot be born out of pity for their circumstances. Nor can this support usurp or supersede the agency, cultural practices, language, and resourcefulness young men bring to school with them. One way to do this is by cultivating empathy as a professional disposition of teachers teaching across difference. Scholars offer details for thinking about how to help teachers to see the world from students' social and cultural points of view (McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Schultz, 2003; Warren, 2013, 2014).
- It is useful to create and invest in social networks, clubs, and organizations that create a sense of brotherhood in both K–12 (Walker, 2006) and postsecondary (Harper, 2006) settings, as well as in out of school contexts (Douglas, 2014; Douglas & Peck, 2013; Ginwright, 2007). Schools and practitioners must carve out a defined space where young men of color can self-affirm, provide one another multiple forms of support, and receive mentorship and access to men of color who provide multiple images of success. Anderson and Harper and Newman's studies emphasize the importance for academic enrichment programs and networks that improve Black male access to experiences to make them college ready. If this space cannot be institutionalized, young men of color will likely create these spaces and avenues of support on their own, much like the young men in Hotchkins' study. Schools need to permit and encourage the organic development of such spaces and kinship amongst young men of color, especially in schools where they are underrepresented.
- Teachers and others in a school aspiring to support Black males should refrain from internalizing and passing on negative stories or depictions of young men of color based on their past mistakes or

failures. Educators must practice learning to co-negotiate multiple paradigms of success and achievement with young men of color when making professional decisions for them. One way that teachers, youth workers, university professors, counselors, and school administrators do this is by developing an understanding of the multiple stakeholders influencing the way a young man thinks and envisions his future self. Brandon's narrative in Douglas and Witherspoon Arnold's article reinforces the significance of this recommendation.

- Similarly, it is crucial for practitioners to suspend judgment about students' notions of self-concept, academic-concept, and the roles they play at home by emphasizing professional development activities that develop a rich understanding of the social, historical, and environmental contexts from which students emerge. Educators must look beyond a young man's behavior characteristic of "disengagement" or "resistance" to see how such feelings developed over time. Action research that examines the academic impact of factors such as indifferent teachers, hostile learning environments, unfair discipline practices, debilitating home life circumstances, and disparities in a family's economic resources can prove quite useful. Hence, it is fundamentally critical to be proactive, rather than reactive. An authentic desire to understand root causes will improve teacher beliefs and behaviors for Black males.

## POLICY

- President Obama's My Brother's Keeper initiative, though a target of scrutiny and criticism, placed an intentional spotlight on ways to improve the life chances of males of color. We would contend that schools across the country should consider similar approaches. Mindful of the fact that gender or racial discrimination issues would be raised around school policies targeting one group, we would recommend school policies to trigger inquiries for any groups with 2:1 ratios of school discipline to population in schools. Thus, if a group is 30% of the school population but they represent 60% of the population that is suspended or expelled, that would raise red flags to assess reasons behind such numbers. Undoubtedly, this would provide equity for all groups, but Black males would benefit perhaps more so than any other sub-group. Perhaps similar clauses could inform policies that would trigger any group that falls below a 60% high school graduation threshold. In short, policies must be responsive to the inordinate amounts of school failure that disproportionately affects certain groups.

- Our policy recommendations of what works for professionals who seek to effectively educate and advocate for Black males must focus on *capacity building*—the development of individuals (e.g., teachers, principals), institutions (e.g., schools, community-organizations) and ideologies (e.g., anti-racist and anti-deficit) that promote Black male success. A fundamental step toward this end is assessing and ensuring the will and the skill that exist among key stakeholders to engage in this critical work (Moore, 2014). This assessment process is vital because individuals, institutions, and ideologies can reflect a continuum of commitments related to Black male achievement, such as disinterest and disengagement (e.g., “I don’t know and I don’t care”); and dedicated and decisive in one’s efforts to effect change (e.g., “I am an advocate and ally”). Drawing inspiration from the work of Moore (2014), Douglas, Ivey, and Bishop (2016) offer the following schema to assess an individual or institution’s capacity to help facilitate Black male achievement:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Will &amp; the Skill</b></p> <p>“I/we care about Black male achievement and I/we possess urgency, capacity and clarity on how to engage individually and/or institutionally”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>No Will but Untapped/Unknown Skill</b></p> <p>“There’s a lack of interest/engagement related to Black male achievement but there are attendant resources that are not being utilized or recognized”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Will but Lack of Skill</b></p> <p>“I/we care but I/we don’t know where or how to engage”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>No Will &amp; Lack of Skill</b></p> <p>“I/we don’t know and I/we don’t care” “I don’t know that I don’t know that I don’t know”</p>

- The initial and ongoing assessment of individual and institutional will and skill should include the acquisition and responsible *utilization of data* to identify and address inequity, blind spots, and programmatic gaps. In this regard, equity audits are a helpful and important resource. Even more vital, Black males must have safe venues where their voices, victories, and vulnerabilities can be shared, heard, affirmed, and then utilized toward the creation of systems and sensibilities that are attuned to Black male perspectives and experiences in context. This special issue is an exemplar of the power of centralizing Black male voices. Because every institution, county, and country has unique cultural contexts, educators and institutions must avoid monolithic and stereotypical approaches. Instead, educational stakeholders must find culturally relevant mechanisms that access and affirm Black male perspectives—this should include the utilization of online resources (e.g., *Teaching Ferguson*) and social media. Policies and programs that recognize and account for the breadth

of Black male identities are vital, including the broad diasporic and international connections that Black males embody.

- In addition to assessing capacity and institutional climate related to Black male achievement, we offer the following specific policy recommendations:
  1. Ensure Black males are exposed to the best of who they are via multiple role models and images of success. This is also done through programmatic efforts inside and outside the schoolhouse. Broad and affirming exposure to educational contexts, forums, opportunities, networks, and mentors who can serve as walking counternarratives to negative stereotypes are vital to promoting Black male success;
  2. Mandate (and, if necessary, incentivize) professional development and training opportunities for educational stakeholders (*e.g.*, leaders, faculty, staff, board members) in school and community-based contexts related to anti-racist practices, diversity, identifying and avoiding microaggressive practices, and engaging in critical and constructive conversations about intersectional identity markers (*e.g.*, race, social class, gender, and sexuality);
  3. Establish and promote school-community partnerships that create a context for Black males and community members to cross borders and develop trust across disparate demographics and diverse social and community groups. While the schoolhouse is important, there are community-based spaces that help to buttress Black male achievement. Policies, practices, and partnerships that acknowledge, incentivize, and even replicate effective pedagogies and leadership in community-based spaces (*e.g.*, community centers and barbershops) should be encouraged (Douglas & Peck, 2013).

## NOTES

1. Authors would like to thank all of the contributors to the special issue including authors, external peer reviewers, and the editorial team of *Teachers College Record*.

2. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Chezare A. Warren, Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University, 620 Farm Lane, East Lansing, MI 48824.



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