DRIVER RESEARCH BRIEF: NARRATIVE

A research brief to maximize the success of African American male students

About this brief

This research brief brings to life Kingmakers of Oakland's driver research through a practitioner lens. With the goal of supporting, extending, and expanding collaborative equity work nationally, it will focus on the practices that make the greatest impact for African American/Black male youth.

The brief discusses timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts and provides reflection questions and resources for educators and community partners to use during professional learning and collaborative conversations. This research brief explores how schools and educators can work together to shift the narrative.

2 Focus

4 Implications and Actions

6 Questions

Focus

Engage in the Collective Power of Storytelling

Black boys and adolescents are not a monolith. While the cultures across Black communities differ widely, there are also observable shared connections among these groups in the U.S, including similar experiences that span across socio-economic status levels and zip codes (Lloyd, 2021). To fully and deeply understand Black boys and youth, understanding the nuances in their communities and listening to their stories from across a spectrum of social and cultural experiences is critical.

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Our narratives contextualize and frame our thinking and our lives. When educators center the complex, experiences of Black boys, recognize that brilliance comes in many shades of brown with intersecting cultural identities (i.e., family traditions, hip hop culture), and design opportunities for them to share their stories, they know that each and every Black boy has the potential for academic and civic greatness. In the 2021 book, *Street Data*, authors Safir and Dugan encourage a focus on storientation (the role of artifacts, narratives, and observations in school transformation) that honor oral traditions. Storientation engages educators in three types of stories: self, other, and organization. During this humanizing data-gathering process, educators highlight bright spots, listen to students' experiences – specifically with regard to inequities or racism, think about how they might co-design instruction after hearing students' ideas about what they would change, and seek to understand the 'why' behind the state and local data.

Example questions in the storientation process may include:
- What are the stories we tell about Black boys in our society?
- What is the story we tell in our schools about Black boys?
- What are the stories Black boys tell about themselves?
- What does the street data show about referrals, suspensions, and expulsions; representation in AP and Honors courses; and data on school connectedness (i.e., feeling connected to at least one adult at school)?

Researchers and practitioners widely agree: there is an urgent need to create a new cohesive, asset-based narrative by and for Black boys (Bryan, 2021; Dreyer, 2020). For centuries, systemic economic inequality, racism, and stereotypes have structurally disadvantaged Black families — and we need to question the persistent, deficit-based narratives for Black youth (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A starting point to understanding the American narrative — specifically how contexts (society, neighborhoods, schools, and families) shape Black boys' narratives — begins with understanding the historical institution of slavery and connecting this traumatic legacy to historical and current-day social injustices, including redlining, the prison industrial complex, and healthcare inequities.

The cumulative nature of these experiences — replayed and rationalized across media and in our schools — result in inaccurate, dangerous mischaracterizations of Black males and influence their disparate treatment in the criminal justice system and access to quality medical care (Nelson, 2016; Robinson & Susner Rogers, 2020). These systemic, deficit-based narratives negatively impact Black boys' perceptions about their own academic abilities (Brooms, 2017; Bryan, 2021; Dreyer, 2020), but they also impact teachers' and administrators' perceptions and expectations of Black boys (Brooms, 2019). To advance educational opportunities for Black boys and to ensure that they feel valued, seen, and loved, educators must unpack how they see them in an authentic, asset-based way.

Reframe the conversation

Strengths-based approaches are essential to reframing the deficit narratives that school systems have upheld for decades as accepted social conditions (Howard et al., 2016). For example, schools maintain a system of inequality through the way they talk about, think about, and plan their work around Black boys (i.e., course placement, discipline

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referrals and suspensions). This is also known as hegemonic cultural discourse. According to Eugene Eubanks, "The consequences of this discourse is to maintain existing schooling practices and results." In contrast, transformational change focuses on cultivating lifelong learners in a purposeful, complex, community-responsive approach (Eubanks, Parish, & Smith, 1997).

One thing is to talk about the work; another thing is to do it. While educators may frequently use code words for change and impact, the larger system continues to maintain the status quo. In this way, there is an illusion of change without widespread transformation. For this reason, innovative organizations engaging in this work are turning to asset-framing as a model to implement powerful change. According to BMe (n.d.), asset-framing is a strengths-based narrative model that defines people through their aspirations, not their deficits. This approach highlights people's strengths and promotes protective practices; it shifts the discourse from sharing stigmatizing stories to telling truthful, and sometimes challenging, narratives that positively inspire entire school communities.

An important branch of the narrative work in an asset-based approach is intensive identity work. Black boys and the culturally responsive educators who support them need to actively deepen their knowledge of African History, the African diaspora, and the Black experience in American History, as they learn about and address internalized oppression. Through these compelling history courses, students and educators intentionally (1) reframe the way they talk about Black boys; (2) create formal and informal spaces and instructional opportunities to discuss and respond to harmful, inaccurate media that reinforce biased narratives (i.e, write letters to the editor; make a complaint to the organization); (3) visualize positive images throughout the school and district; (4) identify strategies (i.e, practice constructivist listening; include Black boys in leadership roles at school) that promote resilience and asset-based opportunities for Black youth; (5) learn how to navigate encounters with law enforcement; and (6) engage in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) via climate surveys, empathy interviews, and listening campaigns, etc. on realities of Black male experiences (Curry, 2017; Howard et al., 2013; NAACP, n.d.).

Implications and Actions

Black male achievement matters. Manifesting this goal requires a collective commitment to change the way we talk about Black boys in the media and center their strengths and assets in schools, classrooms and curriculum. Educators and policy makers need to leverage an asset-based framework as they actively seek to understand the educational experiences that Black boys and adolescents encounter in their educational journeys and build dynamic mentoring and leadership networks for Black boys.

Actions for Educators
(teachers, support staff, administrators):

- Believe Black boys and adolescents are deserving of seeing themselves and other Black boys in a positive manner
- Adopt a warm demander stance by raising expectations of Black boys' academic and social emotional learning and support them to meet these expectations (i.e., integrate dialogue protocols, student-led conferences, etc.)
- Incorporate positive images and narratives of Black boys, adolescents and men around the school, in the classroom and curriculum
- Engage in listening techniques with Black boys to better understand their experiences and academic and social emotional needs (see Driver 3)

- Collect data on engagement, learning, achievement, and retention rates (preschool, elementary, middle, and high school) for Black boys and youth; use this data to design areas of focus and high-quality instruction
- Actively engage and partner with Black families to ensure student success (i.e., send positive messages of affirmation about a quality asset, progress, or excellence)
- Incorporate an intersectional lens and increase awareness of oppressive structures that exist for Black boys (see Driver 1)
- Interrupt racist practices and systemic assaults towards Black youth and adolescents

Actions for Policy Makers (Boards of Education,
Departments of Education, legislatures):

- Eliminate anti-Black discipline policies (i.e., anti-Black discipline policies include policies that consistently demonstrate disparate outcomes for Black male students) and excessive punishment techniques; replace them with restorative, healing centered engagement policies
- Create and monitor policies that remove barriers for basic needs in schools (e.g.., quality nutrition throughout the school day, sufficient school supplies, and public transportation vouchers)
- Include the voices of Black youth, adolescents, and families when creating and evaluating policies
- Establish greater reciprocity in accountability systems. Too often, systems hold schools accountable while ignoring the roles districts play in creating systems that make it difficult for school leaders to lead students of color to excel (Johnson, J., 2023)

Questions

1. Are there structured opportunities for all staff to reflect and examine biases, invisible assumptions, and teaching and leadership practices?
2. In what ways and how often do staff analyze patterns of how they talk about, think about, and plan what is important for Black boys (i.e., discourse)?
3. What opportunities exist for staff to engage in deep listening of Black male students, teachers, and community?
4. In what ways are Black males represented throughout the school (i.e., positive imagery)?
5. In what ways are Black male youth and adolescents talking about themselves?
6. Overall, what is working well for Black youth and adolescents? What is not working well and why?

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