



EDUCATION AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE

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Developing Strategies for Success: World Café Work Sessions Briefing for Policy Makers

Introduction

The past year has brought national attention to the violence and challenges facing too many young men and boys of color, and their families, in communities across the country. Our national dialogue has provided another opportunity to examine our legacy of racial inequity, at the intersection of gender, and how it continues to influence opportunities to succeed. We cannot afford to allow so many of our systems to fail boys of color without jeopardizing the well-being of our community. Understanding our shared legacy and its impacts on our boys of color is necessary for us to move forward as a united community.

Children represent our future, the next generation of skilled workers, entrepreneurs and community leaders. They are the most vulnerable and impressionable of our population, and the challenges they face today will impact their development and shape the vitality of our communities tomorrow.

As policy makers, we need to understand how our actions may impact Black young men. We have the power to make a difference, but only if we address these factors in a way that is not just efficient, but supportive. Listening to the parents, educators, and community leaders is essential to implementing the proper initiatives that will help lead these kids move forward and toward success. The following brief describes three points of tension that are affecting boys of color in the Ohio -- neighborhoods, stress, and implicit biases. After explanation of all three, we introduce several recommendations to address these points.

Neighborhoods: where kids live matters for their success

Neighborhood or “place” is an extremely important domain in which health and well-being are nourished or impeded. The health of a neighborhood is directly tied to the health and well-being of its residents, and this relationship between community conditions and people is strongest for children.¹ Neighborhoods play a powerful role in determining children’s peers, the conditions under which their family members live and work, the quality of the air they breathe, the strength of schools they attend, and the environments in which they move and play. Neighborhoods in distress erect formidable barriers to positive child development, producing stressors that can profoundly impair children’s social and skills growth, psychological and physiological health, and capacity to learn and thrive.

Although poor children of all races suffer when exposed to negative neighborhood conditions, research shows that Black and Latino/Hispanic children are far more likely to live in areas of “high poverty” or “concentrated poverty” (20% or 40% or more of the residents live below the poverty line, respectively)

than white children. Sixty-six percent of Black children born between 1985 and 2000 grew up in high poverty neighborhoods, compared to only 6% of white children.² A study in 2008 showed that Black and Latino/ Hispanic children were more than 12 times as likely as white children to be both poor and living in neighborhoods where poverty was the norm.³

Researchers have also found that prolonged exposure to extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods during childhood negatively impacts cognitive ability and primary and secondary educational outcomes, impeding access to college and economic mobility.⁴ High-poverty schools are indicative of neighborhoods in distress. Some studies estimate that U.S. students spend about 1,150 hours in school compared to 4,700 waking hours per year in their neighborhoods and with their families.⁵ We know that neighborhoods and family environments have powerful effects on educational outcomes, and we need to ensure that both of these environments are equipped with the resources that support and encourage scholastic success and positive life outcomes. Research documents that much of the variation in cognitive skills and behavior can be attributed to family or neighborhood effects and not in-school dynamics.⁶ The depths of this crisis, particularly for Black youth, are perhaps best revealed by a 2010 finding that the average Black male had performed below proficiency in every grade and every subject on the National Assessment of Education Progress for the past 20 years.⁷

Further, Ohio has the worst African American infant mortality rate in the nation. For example in Franklin County, African American infant mortality rates (17.1) are more than double the rates found for white infants (7.5). Similar disparities are found in the rates of low birth weight and preterm birth for African American infants. Of the Franklin County's 8 neighborhood "hot spots" for high rates of infant mortality, 6 of these neighborhoods are majority communities of color. These neighborhoods were also considered low opportunity-- facing high poverty, low employment, housing instability, and transportation barriers⁸-- a sobering reminder that place really is a matter of life and death.

Stress: internal reactions to external forces

The brain is made up of multiple systems that develop differently as a result of the combined influences of genetic predisposition⁹ and lived experience.¹⁰ As a result, positive and negative experiences during our infancy and childhood can dramatically impact our physical, mental, and emotional development. Even intra-uterine stress or trauma can have lasting impacts on children. This means that our earliest experiences in life—in both pre- and post-natal environments-- literally shape our brains. Eighty percent of the brain is organized and developed in the first four years of life.¹¹

When stress is unrelenting and from multiple sources, it is known as "toxic." Children with toxic stress live much of their lives in fight, flight or fright (freeze) mode. They respond to the world as a place of constant danger. With their brains overloaded with stress hormones and unable to function appropriately, they can't focus on learning. They fall behind in school or fail to develop healthy relationships with peers or create problems with teachers and principals because they are unable to trust adults. Some kids do all three. With despair, guilt and frustration pecking away at their psyches, they often find solace in unhealthy attachments, addictions, and behaviors.¹² The more adverse experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of developmental delays and later health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse and depression.

Poverty takes more than a material toll

A complexity of stressors is being borne by many Ohioan families, heightened by the economic insecurity produced by the recession and housing crisis. These economic stressors impact a broad group

of families across our county, from inner city to suburb. It is no stretch to suggest that families living in poverty experience greater stress than more affluent families. This is due not simply to a lack of money, but the constraints poverty imposes on time and mental resources. Adults in impoverished households may find it necessary to work two or three jobs just to stay afloat. They may work shifts or in workplaces that cause them to miss parent teacher conferences. When a car is unaffordable, users of public transit must rely on schedules set by others to get to work, to the grocery store and to other important appointments. Many transit systems offer more limited services at night and on weekends, increasing transit users' anxieties about how to get to work or other places. Too often for families in poverty, time is not on their side. When a family's income is inadequate or suddenly reduced due to the loss of a job or a health crisis, adults worry about feeding their children, being able to pay the rent or make mortgage payments and being able to buy needed medicines, among many other things. Poverty is not just about material deprivation, it is an experience felt in nearly every aspect of life.

Parenting in the context of poverty might be rendered more difficult as a result of the increased cognitive load required of parents who have to juggle many balls at once, and put out fire after fire.¹³ Good parenting, by contrast, is assisted by the availability of stores of untaxed mental resources. Consider a study on food stamps, which recipients receive monthly, at the beginning of the month. For many households, these stamps are not enough to last the month, and so bandwidth (i.e. the level of our mental resources) is more taxed as the end of the month approaches.¹⁴ Research has found this is also the time when parenting is likely to be most difficult.¹⁵ In fact, one study found that these were the times when children of poor parents acted up the most and were being disciplined in school more often.¹⁶ Quite simply, “[b]eing a good parent requires many things. But most of all, it requires freedom of mind. That is one luxury the poor do not have.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, too many of our systems, policies and programs are not designed with these constraints in mind, and thus may inadvertently add to the stress and anxiety poorer families are already facing, to the detriment of program effectiveness.

Implicit Bias: internal perceptions impacting actions and behavior

Implicit bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that influence our decisions and behaviors without our conscious awareness. It differs from intentional bias because it is activated involuntarily without our awareness or intentional control¹⁸ and may even conflict with our explicit or declared beliefs.¹⁹

Throughout our lifetime, we are exposed to billions of direct and indirect messages about the world around us. In fact, neuroscientists believe that our unconscious brains can receive up to 11 million pieces of information at any point in time; however, on a conscious level, we are only capable of receiving up to 40.²⁰ This means that the vast majority of the information we receive each day is absorbed without us ever being aware. And many of the messages we receive about Black and Latino/Hispanic boys encompass harmful and pervasive stereotypes. These ubiquitous messages become embedded into our subconscious minds. Without the benefit of first-hand interracial friendships and interactions, perceptions of minorities are often based on popular culture and distorted images in the media, which can reinforce harmful stereotypes and deepen racial misunderstanding. Consequently, even when it is our intention to remain unbiased, we may unknowingly engage in discriminatory behaviors that adversely affect their life outcomes.

As a critical part of this process, acknowledging and mitigating the negative effects of implicit racial bias can help ensure the strengths and assets of Black males are fully realized and appreciated. Fortunately, our implicit biases are malleable. Thus, challenging these associations is the first step in creating positive action that is congruent with the egalitarian values most individuals possess.

Finally, we are compelled to engage in an evaluation of our current institutional processes and policies with the intent of minimizing opportunities for implicit bias to operate. By taking steps to increase awareness and challenge implicit bias, one can begin the process of creating an environment that both reflects and benefits the larger society.

Recommendations: designing research-based, opportunity-oriented interventions

There are several strategies for addressing the effects of neighborhoods, stress, and implicit biases on young Black males in Ohio. For policy makers, it is essential to understand what forces these boys are facing so we can better design policies and programs to help alleviate the negative impacts.

The research on the effects of stress on cognitive development challenges policymakers and systems leaders to expand our scope of investment and problem-solving, to create policies and practices that reflect the two key lessons from the latest research: **begin as early as possible**, the earliest intervention is the strongest and most cost-effective; and, **it is never too late**, relationships with stable adults and caregivers can heal, setting youth on a new path to success.

We have learned that stress regulation for children begins in the womb. Policies and programs that provide support to at-risk mothers are imperative—from nutritional support to emotional support. The more resources mothers have, the more equipped they will be to form nurturing attachments with their babies. And these first relationships are critical for setting the child on a path to healthy development. But the support for these mothers cannot end at birth. We know that from 0 to 3 years old, the brain is developing at an incredible rate. By 4 years of age, over 80% of the brain is developed. Thus, pre-K is an incredibly fragile time in the development of the child. Babies and toddlers who experience prolonged stress or trauma during this stage of development can experience long-term damage—their physiology is altered. And while interventions for at-risk youth exist at every stage of development, we must heed what the research shows us—that the earliest intervention is the strongest. Interventions made at these earliest years generate the biggest return on investment.

We must also reassess how our systems and institutions support our young Black males. When combined with misperceptions and implicit biases, boys who are behaviorally challenged are more likely to be labeled as a ‘problem’ and tracked into special education, and thus out of our mainstream systems. Without interventions, as the child grows older, he is likely to move through the mental health system, and ultimately, the juvenile justice system, because stress-induced challenges do not disappear if not addressed.

Our systems and programs should also reflect the understanding of just how mentally “taxing” poverty is. We should devise ways to provide wrap-around services that serve as a protective buffer for families, seeking ways to increase food security, housing stability, access to mental and physical health care, etc. We know that the more stable the environment the child grows up in, the better for the child’s brain development. Ensuring a stable environment means increasing, leveraging and communicating the varied state, local, and national resources families have access to and it means ensuring that these resources are reliably available for those most in need. Policies should support, not impede, at-risk families working towards stability and security. Access to dependable resources for at-risk families allows these parents and caregivers the ability to devote critical attention to the socio-emotional development of the child.

Our investment decisions must better reflect the reality that neighborhoods matter immensely for child outcomes. Quite simply, distressed neighborhoods produce distressed children. We know what neighborhoods of low opportunity look like, and we know where they are.

Conclusion

Now equipped with the research and information, it is up to us as policy makers and leaders to ensure the young Black males of Ohio have access to the resources they will need to be successful in the future. As policy makers, we have the power to make a large impact so we must move forward with good intentions and deep understanding of where the roots of the tensions arise. Realizing how neighborhood conditions, stress, and implicit biases challenge young Black males and inhibit their full potential is key to establishing solutions at depths responsive to the needs. We have the opportunity to provide the support for these children and it is now the time to act.

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