



# EDUCATION AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE

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## Developing Strategies for Success: World Café Work Sessions Briefing for Educators

### *Introduction*

Numerous events have 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.

Educators are aware that their students have forces outside the classroom affecting their performance inside. These structural points of tension, coupled with the internal cognition and perception of fellow peers, teachers, and administrators, impact the success these kids experience during childhood and extending throughout the rest of their lives. The following brief expands on several points of tension our young boys of color face in their everyday lives-- how we think about and talk about Black boys (our implicit biases and narratives), poverty, and stress. As educators, we need to be aware of these external and internal forces, formulate pertinent strategies, and concentrate resources that foster future success.

### *Perceptions and narratives can inflict harm on boys of color*

One of the defining qualities of children is their innocence, yet extensive research documents that Black children are not afforded the same protections of “innocence” conferred on other children. The stories we tell ourselves and each other about our young boys of color matter. One study in particular examined the narratives parents, teachers, and Black boys themselves used to describe Black boys as it relates to educational achievement and the impacts these narratives can have.<sup>1</sup> The researchers found most of the narratives are negative, fatalistic narratives that undermine scholastic success and reinforce the broader narrative that these boys are beyond hope or in peril.<sup>2</sup> For example, teachers were found to

have biased perspectives—seeing Black boys as aggressive, problematic, and defiant—and were more likely to refer them to special education or discipline them without compelling evidence of serious infractions.<sup>3</sup> There is even evidence that the boys themselves may adopt these narratives, in an effort to preserve self-esteem, or reflecting an understanding that the school devalues them (based on early discipline experiences).<sup>4</sup> Sadly, this internalization gives rise to a self-fulfilling expectation of delinquent behavior. Students who are labeled as defiant or problematic “are more likely to internalize these labels and act out in ways that match the expectations that have been set for them ... A large body of research has shown that labeling and exclusion practices can create a self-fulfilling prophesy and result in a cycle that can be difficult to break.”<sup>5</sup>

Research suggests that boys struggle more within traditional academic systems than girls, and this mismatch between learning styles and educational practice can lead to a disconnection, at an early age, of boys from school.<sup>6</sup> Identity development of boys—the “boy code” to be tough, independent, strong that society often demands—further complicates the issues of academic underachievement, and perhaps particularly so for our young boys of color. For Black boys in particular, white female teachers may misunderstand many aspects of their demeanor, including behaviors, academic ability, emotional expression, and even style of walk, speech, or masculinity.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Black male students express their thoughts in what has been described as a flamboyant and nonconformist manner, known as “cool pose.”<sup>8</sup> Although this is not inherently problematic, issues arise when this communication is misinterpreted by teachers. While many of these misperceptions are based on comparisons to what is commonly recognized as “good behavior” (i.e. quiet, thoughtful, etc.), the teachers’ misperceptions are also partially informed by messages about Black males in the media that portray them as violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, and hyper-masculine.<sup>9</sup> In turn, teachers may rationalize that such behavior and exchanges are defiant and intimidating. As a result, Black male students are more likely to be disciplined or expelled.

Again, research in this domain documents that teachers may not perceive Black boys as naturally innocent as other children or given the benefit of the doubt (the “boys will be boys”) that white boys receive. Instead, “their early behaviors of disobedience in schools are thought to presage future trajectories of violence and prison sentences.”<sup>10</sup>

#### *School discipline disparities facilitate contact with the criminal justice system*

Tragically, these misperceptions can fundamentally alter the life trajectory of Black boys, as they may funnel them into the school-to-prison pipeline that is so prevalent in American society today. We have 30 years of research documenting racial disproportion in discipline practices at schools.<sup>11</sup> Nationally, Black students are expelled three times more frequently than white students.<sup>12</sup> Though they made up just 16% of students enrolled in 2011-12, they accounted for 31% of all in-school arrests. And this disparity begins almost immediately. In preschool, 48% of preschool children who are suspended more than once are Black. Given these numbers, we really should be talking about a preschool-to-prison pipeline.

Data compiled by the Ohio Children’s Defense Fund show that the level of disparity between out-of-school suspension rates for Black and White students in Ohio’s largest urban school districts ranges from a factor of 1.9 to a factor of 13.3.<sup>13</sup> This means that the average Black student enrolled in these districts is four times more likely to be suspended than the average white student.<sup>14</sup>

Studies are documenting the link between racial disproportion in out-of-school suspensions and racial disproportion in the juvenile justice systems.<sup>15</sup> One such study finds that “racial disproportion in out-of-school suspensions, which cannot be explained solely by differences in delinquent behavior, is strongly associated with similar levels of disproportion in the juvenile justice system” and this persists after controlling for poverty, urbanization, and other factors.<sup>16</sup>

### *Poverty and segregation erect barriers to educational success*

Race, school segregation, and shifting educational policies deeply impact Ohio’s neighborhoods and opportunities for children. Concentration of poverty impedes access to educational opportunity in a variety of ways. First, poverty limits the resources available to families and schools to promote child learning. According to one study, “high-poverty schools have to devote far more time and resources to family and health crises, security, children who come to school not speaking standard English, seriously disturbed children, children with no educational materials in their homes, and many children with very weak educational preparation.”<sup>17</sup> And in segregated neighborhoods, the number of children experiencing such challenges is higher, thereby intensifying the problem and requiring even more resources to help those in need. Low-income students of color are also more likely to have less-qualified teachers, more likely to have teachers who completed an alternative certification program, and are more likely to be taught by substitute teachers.<sup>18</sup> As a result, students attending high-poverty schools, which are commonly students of color, are more likely to have lower academic achievement. School poverty has serious implications not just for students, but for districts, communities, and entire regions. This is not new. In fact, the 1966 Coleman Report (a study of inequality of opportunity in education) concluded that concentrated poverty inevitably depresses achievement on a school-wide and a district-wide basis—the effects are not contained within school walls.<sup>19</sup>

### *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 predisposition<sup>20</sup> and lived experience.<sup>21</sup> Thus, positive and negative experiences during our infancy and childhood can dramatically impact our physical, mental, and emotional development. This means that our earliest experiences in life literally shape our brains. Eighty percent of the brain is organized and developed in the first four years of life.<sup>22</sup> Positive, predictable experiences aid that development, while consistently stress-producing experiences impair it. One study found an almost 9% reduction in the size of the hippocampus—through which memory and emotions are controlled—in children suffering the effects of childhood trauma.<sup>23</sup>

The cumulative effects of stress are toxic to child development. A stress response system that is not strengthened and engaged in positive ways can have a powerful, debilitating effect on a child's development. Although some stress is actually healthy for children, stress that is layered and prolonged can literally make children sick, or even produce health crises in adulthood such as heart disease, diabetes, or stroke.<sup>24</sup> The more "tuned up" one gets from trauma or stress, the more scrambled the cortex becomes—the region of the brain that regulates our emotions and attachments, and that houses our intellectual capacity.

The everyday trauma that too often is a part of life for children growing up in very poor families in distressed neighborhoods can inflict long-term damage on children. Such stressors include hunger, housing insecurity, exposure to violence at home or in the community, and so forth. Childhood trauma is not confined to these communities, of course, and is an important social concern wherever it occurs. However, trauma—whether physical, mental or emotional—can result in cognitive and motor delays (such as language development), anxiety, depression, challenges forming healthy attachments and other behavioral disorders.<sup>25</sup>

For example, the stress associated with food insecurity and hunger impact a child's ability to learn. The recession greatly increased food insecurity for families. Between 2007 and 2011, there was a 94% increase in unemployment. In response, reliance on SNAP (i.e. food stamps) rose by 70% over the same period.<sup>26</sup> 45% of SNAP participants are under the age of 18,<sup>27</sup> and 20% of children in the United States live in food insecure households, meaning that they do not know where their next meal is coming from.<sup>28</sup> Hunger and food insecurity during the early years of a child's life (0-3 years old) are especially damaging, impacting physical and mental development. For example in Franklin County, about 21% of children experience food insecurity<sup>29</sup> and 45% are recipients of SNAP assistance.<sup>30</sup> Research shows that going hungry makes children sick.<sup>31</sup> And sick children miss more school. When they do make it to class, hungry children have a harder time focusing, and may be more irritable or experience fatigue more than other children.<sup>32</sup> Food- insecure children—children not yet experiencing the state of hunger— were found to exhibit higher levels of aggression or distressed behaviors, as well as a greater tendency to be withdrawn.<sup>33</sup> Even mild to moderate undernourishment can limit children's ability to grasp basic skills.<sup>34</sup> One study found that food insecure children performed lower on math and reading, and were more likely to repeat a grade.<sup>35</sup> Hunger and food insecurity, above and beyond poverty, have significant and negative impacts on children's educational performance.

#### *Implicit Bias: an unconscious barrier to success*

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 control<sup>36</sup> and may even conflict with our explicit or declared beliefs.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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.

*Recommendations: educators are critical sources of support and stability*

Luckily, there are several strategies to addressing the effects of misperceptions and implicit biases, toxic stress and trauma, and poverty on young Black males in Ohio. For educators, it is essential to understand what forces these boys are facing and how we can help alleviate the negative impacts.

Perhaps one of the strongest interventions we as educators can make is actively challenging our own implicit biases and narratives of Black boys. The research outlined here calls for a new narrative. As educators, we need to re-organize our frames and narratives from one of deficit/risk to one of support/potential. Indeed, “the school-related challenges Black boys face...reflect complex processes that are explained, in part, by the ways that Black boys are framed by important others in their lives and even by themselves. ... Solutions for Black boys lie in rethinking the risk narrative that we have applied to the case of Black boys.”<sup>39</sup> Given the outcomes in education we see for our Black male youth, this research suggests that “our collective perceptions of Black boys may keep them from performing at the highest level.”<sup>40</sup> Further, interrupting our own implicit biases is one way to begin to break down the school-to-prison pipeline that is a life course for too many of our young Black males.

We now know more about just how debilitating stress and trauma are on the developing child. Yet we also know that how the child responds to traumatic events and stressors is just as important. And children who cope the best often have strong support systems and relationships to buffer the effects of stress. Teachers are an important source of support for children. A critical question for teachers and school administrators is how well our schools and classrooms provide caring, supportive environments--are these, in fact, safe and nurturing places that promote resiliency and thus long-term success for some of our most vulnerable children?

We must also reassess how our systems and institutions support our boys of color. When combined with our internal, often unconscious, 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. Educators have a responsibility to develop trauma-informed systems of care in the school to ensure that children are receiving the help they need, that reflects their physiological reality, and minimizing the risk of mis-diagnosis (for example, with ADHD, or tracked into special-education classes). Training can be provided to teachers and other administrative staff to enable them to identify, assess, and treat traumatized children.<sup>41</sup>

Because many of our communities remain highly segregated by race, the provision of diverse educational settings is one of the most important roles played by our schools, including public universities and colleges. Studies have found that “children feel more connected to inclusive schools. And schools that report greater student connectedness have lower rates of drug use, violence, heavy drinking, smoking, and suicide attempts—so the benefits don’t just go to the children who would otherwise be victimized, but to the whole community.”<sup>42</sup> We must also model perspective-taking for children in our classrooms, and teach empathy, to combat the insidious effects of implicit bias. We should encourage intergroup contact with others who are different from ourselves, and make sure our children are exposed to different cultures, viewpoints, and ways of doing things.

### *Conclusion*

The challenges facing boys of color are great, but so is the potential for success. Working together, focusing attention on the structural influences that impact children such as segregation and poverty, addressing internal reactions that may impact how we work with them, and reorganizing school environments to instill a sense of safety and care can reduce the challenges our boys of color face, and lead the way to a brighter future for all of us.

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