



EDUCATION AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE

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Developing Strategies for Success: World Café Work Sessions Briefing for Community Leaders

Introduction

Numerous incidents 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.

As community leaders, it is our job to foster an environment within neighborhoods that encourage collaboration and participation that is supportive of kids. Providing a safe and inviting place for them to interact and develop will establish the base for future success. We must understand how external forces impact internal reactions and behaviors and strive to help break down negative narratives and perceptions these kids-- and others in their life-- may have of themselves. The following brief describes several points of tension that are affecting boys of color—neighborhoods, stress, and implicit biases. After explanation of all three, we introduce several recommendations to address these points as community leaders.

Neighborhoods: where kids live matters for their success

The role of environments in effecting positive child outcomes is well-established. Well-functioning “opportunity structures” provide essential supports for positive child development and benefit entire communities. These include physical structures such as quality schools, nearby health care facilities, healthy food sites, safe spaces for recreation, adequate public services, and so on. 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.¹ 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. As documented in our 2013 Champion of Children Report, Black children are more likely to live in neighborhoods where poverty rates are double those found in the typical neighborhoods for white children in the Columbus Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Researchers have 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.² 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.³ Black and Latino/Hispanic youth in Ohio similarly show large gaps in reading and math proficiencies. 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.

Stress: internal reactions to external forces

For children living in “opportunity poor” neighborhoods, understandings about the connections between environments, traumatic stress and cognitive development provide important guidance as to the steps needed to ensure that every child in Ohio reaches his full potential. We know that neighborhoods that lack sound opportunity structures like high-quality schools, safe streets and play spaces, and fresh food outlets limit the range of choices available to parents and their children. But we must better understand how cognitive development itself can be impaired or promoted by the environments that surround our children. Childhood environments operate in systemic and reciprocal ways. For example, environmental conditions (e.g., inadequate housing or failing schools) can limit choices, limited choices can create stress, stress can impair health and functioning, impaired functioning can inhibit opportunities to find employment or thrive in school, lack of work or a sound educational footing can limit access to health-promoting environments, and on and on.

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 children do all three. With despair, guilt and frustration pecking away at their psyches, they often find solace in unhealthy activities, behaviors, or relationships.⁴

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 control⁵ and may even conflict with our explicit or declared beliefs.⁶

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 40.⁷ 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. Racial discrimination can also trigger high levels of stress within individuals. A new study shows that Black youth exposed to racial discrimination were subject to experiencing negative health outcomes later in life.⁸

Discipline, criminalization and the challenges of navigating school systems, perceptions and biases

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. In one compelling study, researchers looked not only at racial bias, but studied the effects of dehumanization, defined as “the denial of full humanness to others” which can lead to the removal or reduction of “social protections from violence;” in this case, protection from violence or severe adult-like treatment potentially being visited on children. Across a series of studies that largely focused on views of Black boys, research findings included the following:

- Perceptions of children’s innocence varied by race and age. Generally speaking, Black children were viewed as less innocent than white children and people in general (race unspecified). Starting at age 10, Black children were regarded as significantly less innocent than other children of the same age.
- Participants overestimated the age of Black males (ages 10-17) when those males were presented as having committed either a misdemeanor or felony. When perceived as a felony suspect, Black males were seen as more than 4.5 years older than their actual age. Black males were also viewed as more culpable than their Latino or white counterparts.
- Using a sample of police officers, researchers found that the implicit dehumanization of Blacks predicted the extent to which officers overestimated Black children’s ages, perceptions of Black suspects’ culpability, and the use of force (ranging from takedown/wrist lock to disarming a firearm or giving a choke hold) against Black children relative to youth of other races.

We have 50 years of research documenting the overrepresentation of racial minorities at all stages of the justice process (arrest, referral, conviction, and confinement).⁹ The Sentencing Project, which calculated state rates of incarceration by race and ethnicity, found that Black youth are incarcerated at six times the rate of white youth, while Latino youth are incarcerated at double the rate of white youth.¹⁰

We also have 30 years of research documenting racial disproportion in discipline practices at schools.¹¹ Black students are expelled three times more frequently than white students.¹² 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.

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: creating communities of care

Luckily, there are several strategies for addressing the effects of neighborhoods, stress, and implicit biases on young Black males in Ohio. For community leaders working with children in our neighborhoods, the research calls for a renewed understanding of what children need: high-quality, stable supports.

For community leaders, this means strategies should focus on providing long-term and reliable programming and support for children. A safe and predictable environment is a fundamental building block for healthy development—what can community leaders and organizations do to create these safe spaces? Community-based organizations correctly devote a lot of resources and attention to providing access to structural resources for children and families in their communities, such as affordable housing, healthy food, job training or health care. But they should also think about how they provide for the physiological resources children need, such as staff trained to recognize children impacted by trauma and with the skills to intervene appropriately. For when it comes to investing in supports for children, it is not a question of either “structure” or “nurture,” but a matter of both/and. To approach it as a choice between the two—structures or physiology—is a false choice.

Conclusion

Now equipped with the research and information, it is up to us as community members and leaders to ensure the young Black men of Ohio have access to the resources they will need to be successful in the future. Understanding the external forces, such as neighborhood conditions, as well as the internal reactions, such as stress and implicit biases, deepen our knowledge of what is impacting our young boys of color today in Ohio. The deep disparities in outcomes we see for our Black boys demand that we act now to set these boys on a path to success, and prepare them to be tomorrow’s leaders.

References

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⁹ Nicholson-Crotty, Sean, et al. "Exploring the Impact of School Discipline on Racial Disproportion in the Juvenile Justice System," *Social Science Quarterly* 90(4): 1005. (December 2009).

¹⁰ See Marc Mauer & Ryan S. King, *The Sentencing Project*, *Uneven Justice: State Rates of Incarceration by Race and Ethnicity* (2007).

¹¹ *Supra* n. 11

¹² Libby Nelson and Dara Lind, "The school-to-prison pipeline, explained," *Vox* February 24, 2015.