

Disrupting Structural Racism: Counter-Narratives of Pride, Growth, and Transformation

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Scholars and practitioners around the country are collaborating to build an asset-based counter-narrative about young men of color and develop concrete, evidence-based strategies to better serve them in schools and classrooms.

[Adriana Villavicencio] could hear roaring applause from outside the classroom. Inside, almost thirty boys were clapping and cheering, some halfway hanging off their seats, some standing up. I thought maybe they had just gotten news about an unexpected school break, a class trip, or the Brooklyn Nets making it to the playoffs. But I was mistaken. They were cheering for the students in each grade who had earned the highest GPA that semester, as well as the students whose GPAs had improved the most. They were a group of Black and Latino ninth- and tenth-grade students, each paired with a mentor from the eleventh and twelfth grade. They met twice a week to talk about their classes and learn about the college application process. They had traveled on trips upstate and had visited historically Black colleges several states away. I revisited the class throughout that year and was always struck not only by the intimacy of the relationships, but also by the commitment of the educators to provide a safe space and the resources students needed to meet their goals.

What the school staff and students had co-created at the High School for Law and Public Service in New York City is not unique. Since then, I have had the good fortune of talking with district leaders and educators from around the country – from Los Angeles Unified to Kansas City, from Boston to Oakland, California – all local stewards of President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative. They’ve shared stories of their young men becoming leaders in their schools and in their

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communities, bolstered by a supportive network of educators, researchers, and leaders willing and able to call out the racism inherent in our school systems and committed enough to invest resources to combat it. This network of change agents has showcased stories and strategies on national calls hosted by the White House; we've presented at conferences; and sometimes we read about each other's work in the media and in journals like this one.

And yet, we largely work in silos. When the conferences end, we go back to our corners of the world and attend to the pressing needs before us. We may take a few good ideas back with every intention to reconnect, but more often than not, we part ways having talked about our work, but not really learning from others.

LEARNING TOGETHER ABOUT SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Born out of a desire to break out of our silos, my co-author and colleague, Rosann Tung, and I set out to organize a small convening of educator-researcher teams from across seven districts engaged in MBK efforts. The convening took place in September 2017, sponsored by the American Educational Research Association. The seven districts were geographically diverse, of different sizes,¹ but all majority Black and Latino, and all proactively using critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic 2012) and/or targeted universalism (powell 2009)² to inform practice and policy at the system level. Each district brought leaders of initiatives focused on boys and young men of color and collaborating researchers charged with documenting the implementation of these initiatives and outcomes for the young men involved in them.

Our goals were to gather a small enough number of participants to ensure deep conversation in a convening long enough to foster authentic connections among us, and to include mechanisms to sustain these conversations long past the convening itself. The convening would be an opportunity for us not only to present the glossy brochures and highlight what is working in our respective districts – and there is much that is working – but also to face what was hard about this work, ask each other tough questions, and figure out ways to continue our efforts despite constant changes in administration and cuts to funding.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* is a product of that convening and our aspirations to advance the conversation around better serving young men of color, while also providing a framework for understanding this work, a set of concrete strategies to make it come alive in schools and classrooms, and a lens to examine its effectiveness over time.

COMMON THEMES

In a study I [Rosann Tung] co-led in Boston, a well-intentioned elementary school teacher answered our question about her approach to meeting the needs of Black or Latino males in her classroom in this way:

We treat everybody the same. If you're a boy or you're a girl, you're still treated the same. Like I said, races are the same. . . . I don't really see any difference.

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1. The districts range greatly in size: New York City, 1.1 million students; Chicago, 371,400; Austin, 81,400; Guilford, NC, 71,900; Boston, 56,000; Minneapolis, 37,200; Oakland 36,900.
2. See also <https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism>.

Responses like these peppered that study, which documented the systemic opportunity gap facing Black and Latino male students in Boston Public Schools (Tung et al. 2015).

This kind of “color-blind” lens and practice (Bonilla-Silva 2014) is what educators and scholars gathered at our September 2017 conference were attempting to disrupt. Although most participants had never been in conversation with each other, they converged in a striking number of non-traditional ways. They all saw their young men of color as experts on their communities rather than as blank slates to mold. They took responsibility for being responsive to race and gender rather than being color-blind. Their initiatives focused on changing the adults in the system rather than on changing the youth.

As a result, the language that participants used at the conference was asset-based and explicitly anti-racist, rather than deficit-based or silent about race, as mainstream education language sometimes can be. Counter-narratives abounded of pride, growth, and transformation *in spite of* entrenched structural racism.

The district policies, programs, and practices that conference participants shared also ran counter to mainstream, piecemeal solutions, such as test preparation and punitive discipline policies. System-wide strategies included professional development on examining privilege and implicit bias, programming that addresses trauma and socio-emotional development, restorative discipline practices, and recruitment of men of color from the community as teachers and mentors. Curriculum was relevant, engaging, and action-oriented.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This collection of articles shares some of the highlights of the AERA-sponsored research conference and the perspectives of scholars and districts engaged in systemic initiatives to improve education for young boys and men of color. The first two articles exemplify system-wide commitment to and rationale for the focus on Black and Latino male students, providing rich stories of program implementation in schools across Oakland and Boston that emanate from dedicated central offices charged with closing opportunity gaps. Next, Guilford County (NC), Minneapolis, and New York City portray culturally sustaining practices through keen attention to healthy and respectful relationships among community members, educators, and students. Given that half of the participants at the conference were researchers and evaluators, the next two articles describe how research-practice partnerships provide data that enhances policy and programming. We close with a model from Austin for scaling the focus on young men of color from local to state, regional, and national networks.

We hope to build on the momentum from this conference by continuing to share promising practices and policies through future, expanded convenings. This work challenges us to answer the questions: How do we transform the dominant systems and narrative into ones that close opportunity gaps and develop Kings?³ How can we build capacity and community among educators and policymakers engaged in this work not just in these cities, but across the country . . . and not just for a season, but for years to come?

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3 For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see the article by Chatmon and Gray in *VUE* no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

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