

“Research and Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Tyrone Howard and Tr’Vel Lyons to share their research on enhancing the educational experiences of Black males. They offer seven research-based recommendations and suggest that 2021 provides a significant opportunity to reimagine content, pedagogy, student-teacher relationships, and the school experience for Black males.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research and Practice” Editor, University of Minnesota

Enriching the Educational Experiences of Black Males

Tyrone C. Howard and Tr’Vel Lyons

When discussing the topic of education of Black males in school, education scholar Chezare Warren reminds practitioners and researchers to lead with possibility and not the problems.¹ It goes without saying that Black males bring a rich wealth of experiential knowledge to every classroom they occupy and that it is the duty of the teachers to spotlight and cultivate that richness in ways that foster their affinity to schools and learning. When assessing the “outcomes” of Black males, we should move the unit of analysis to what will happen if their education is humanizing and equitable in lieu of the repercussions of continued disenfranchisement.² Enriching the educational experiences of Black males—who, again, have so much to offer in classrooms—means creating structures that offer consistent support, caring educators, and learning environments equipped with culturally responsive pedagogy. It is imperative that social studies educators be unafraid to develop the said pedagogy with rigor and high expectations. Enhancing the educational experiences of Black males would in turn enhance the educational experience of all students.³

There is a need for a paradigm shift regarding the way we envision what Black

males are capable of and susceptible to during their schooling experience. When creating and reimagining best practices to support Black males, educators should lead with positive possibilities in lieu of the banal negative outcomes that result from being underserved, overlooked, and punished. Rather than emphasizing to Black males the consequences of not graduating high school or of not attending college, practitioners should adopt a perspective that highlights the potential if these students are supported. Changing the perception of what is possible for Black males in school is the first step; the next step is providing the support and resources to make this vision a reality. In this article, we aim to provide best practices for *enhancing the educational experiences of Black males*. We champion recommendations marked imperative by impactful scholarship focused on the achievement of equity in education and by the studies that speak to the resilience of Black males and the rich experiences they bring to the classroom.

Situating this article in the present, we discuss best practices in light of COVID-19, distance learning, the racial reckoning of spring 2020, and the imminent reopening of schools nationwide. As of spring 2021, many states across

the nation have announced a move to 100% in-person instruction for students, and have removed their mandatory mask mandates. Many other states seem to be following suit, with varying degrees of caution. The conversation about school safety for the nation’s most vulnerable populations is now a lot more complex. Now is the time to expand restorative practices, utilize trauma-informed processes, and engage in the reimagining of academic spaces that will create a new normal for classroom engagement for all students.

Schooling will never be the same, and schools should prepare themselves to deal with students’ grieving process for the past ways of learning. Admittedly, we should be saying good riddance to some aspects—exclusionary discipline measures, overcrowded classrooms, and oppressive police presence on school campuses—all of which are issues that have had a profound influence on Black males. However, here we will speak to the good practices—necessary social aspects, academic support systems, interpersonal engagement, and critical conversations—that need to be retained and adapted.

We situate these practices within a larger context around race and racism.



Mentor speaking with students.

(Photo by Sydney Cattouse, www.yvngcattphotography.com)

The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor brought about important discussions about the urgency to dismantle systemic racism. To be clear, the call to end racism must be taken seriously by educators at all levels. Social studies educators can and should be exemplars for addressing systemic inequities in an increasingly diverse society. Social studies educators can and should be at the forefront of engaging in classroom inquiry around issues tied to racial discrimination, structural inequality, and the current economic, social, and political conditions that create a racial caste system in our society.⁴ Unfortunately, many Black males can speak firsthand to the ways that covert and overt racism has influenced and continues to influence their schooling experiences. Hence, this is not the time for “colorblind” approaches or White

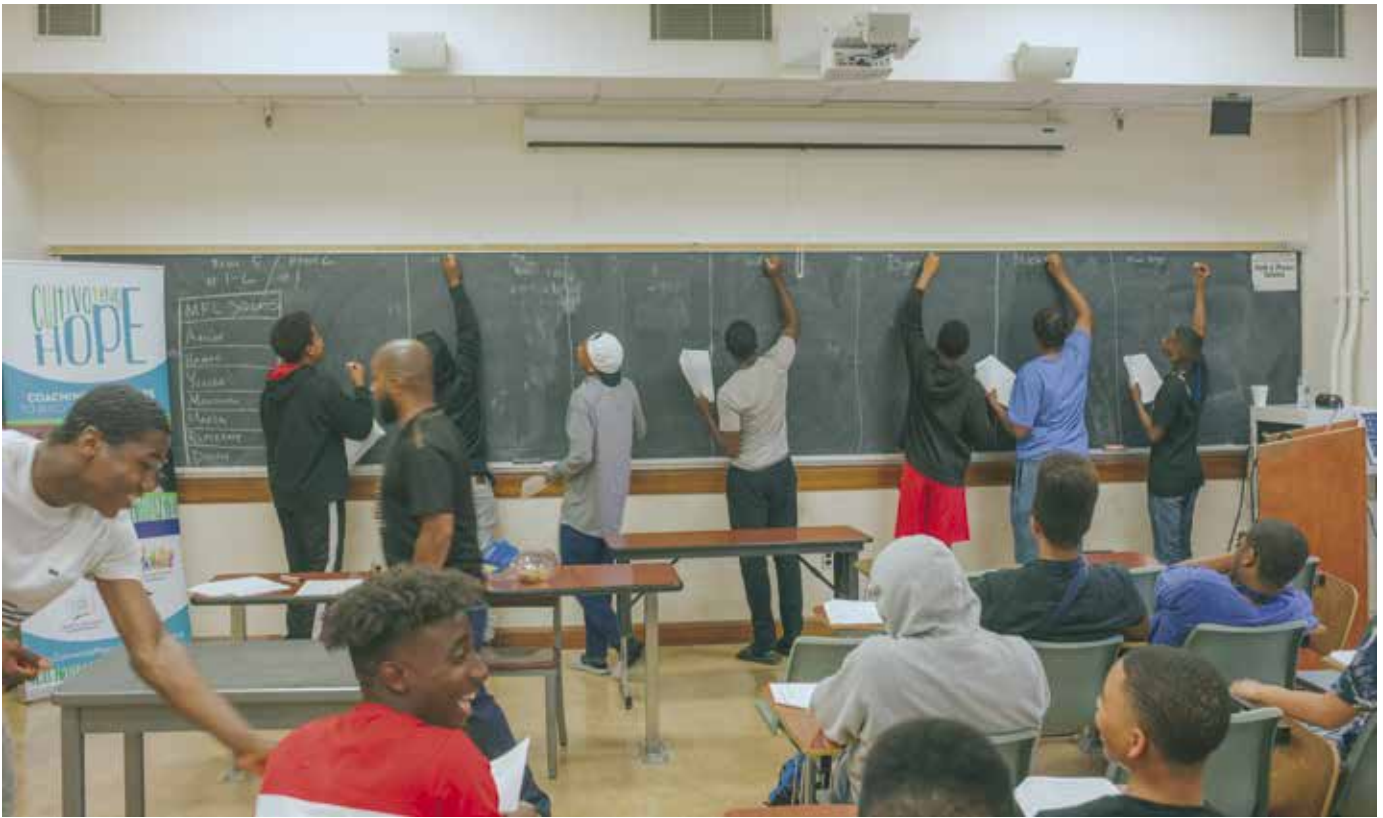
fragility in discussing the needs of Black males. The current context reminds us that race still matters. For many Black males, it is a salient part of their identity and should not be minimized or ignored. What follows are seven concrete steps that educators and schools can take to enhance the educational experiences of Black males.

1. More Black Teachers and Mentors

Recent research reveals that the number of Black teachers is declining. Approximately 7% of our nation’s teachers are Black (2% are Black men), and the dearth of Black teachers has a significant impact on the education of Black students.⁵ Black males, in particular, are disproportionately more likely to experience exclusionary discipline during their K-12 educational

experience. When Black students have a Black teacher, they are less likely to be suspended or expelled and are more likely to attend college.⁶ What is it that many Black teachers do that others may fall short in? Historically, Black teachers’ commitment to students is woven into culture and community, extending far beyond the classroom. Black culture and the experience of Blackness is largely polyethnic. Black males bring varied experiences of Black culture and presentations of masculinity. While we posit that hiring more Black teachers would increase the time these students engage with adults with shared experiences, we caution against hiring Black candidates who would reinforce oppressive and narrow notions of manhood. It’s important to recruit and hire personnel who are equally variant in presentations of Blackness and masculinity. Moreover, all teachers—regardless of racial/ethnic and gender background—must be familiar with the interests, values, challenges, and necessary supports for the everyday life of Black males.

Teaching Black males requires the recognition of race and racism and how it impacts their lives. Though all Black male students may not get the chance to study W.E.B. DuBois during their K-12 experience, many are all too familiar with the reality of double consciousness. They see themselves represented in pop culture and media; they see themselves in the incessant images and videos of police brutality against Black people; however, they rarely see representations of themselves in academic curriculum or leading the classrooms of their schools. Unless, of course, it’s February. We argue that increasing the number of culturally competent teachers and mentors, particularly those who are Black, in schools would embolden students to center their experience in their learning and strengthen their affinity to school and learning. Regardless of how impactful a single Black teacher or mentor can be, one teacher seldom alters the educational trajectory of a student in a vacuum. Schools and educators must create K-16



Students at the chalkboard, engaging in academic competition. (Photo by Sydney Cattouse, www.yvngcattphotography.com)

pipelines designed to engage with students as they progress through education, providing access and resources along the way.

2. Pipeline Initiatives

Students begin internalizing how others perceive them in an academic setting as early as first grade. Therefore, nurturing a positive academic self-concept for students must start early and remain consistent.⁷ Teachers and administrators set expectations and viable options for their students frequently and openly, and students are notably perceptive of teachers' expectations and investment in their academic trajectory. The vision that teachers have for students significantly influences their self-image and aspirations. When the topic of a pipeline for Black males is discussed and researched, there are innumerable connections to the school-to-prison pipeline. Both the nexus and this thought process must be dismantled. It is imperative that there be initiatives that carry students through a pipeline that readies Black males for far more

positive outcomes than incarceration.

By suggesting pipeline initiatives, we are not proclaiming that every student should be presented with prescribed plans for pursuing a graduate degree. The pipelines and their offerings should provide resources that increase exposure to college, for those who have a desire to go, while also connecting students to potential career opportunities. Black males are disproportionately discouraged from enrolling in college preparatory coursework and experience access inequality across all stages of their education.⁸ In light of persistent disparities, Black males need educational pipeline initiatives that bring equity to both the allocation of resources and the unequal learning opportunities present in highly segregated American schools, especially in urban contexts. Stakeholders of the pipeline will have to consistently address leaks, i.e., combat attrition. A way to do that effectively is to engage Black males in critical and stimulating pedagogy. Teachers and mentors should use critical pedagogy to empower students to

challenge systems of inequity and foster their own educational agency.⁹

3. Make Curriculum Critical and Engaging

Even as schools continue to reopen, we are still enduring a pandemic. Students have been disrupted from their sense of normalcy, connections with their peers, and interactions with school personnel for over a year. Schools have been closed for nearly four semesters. For many Black males, school has for too long been disenfranchising and, more importantly, disengaging. They notice when their cultures and communities are not present in the curriculum and often pinpoint this absence as a reason for “checking out” or devaluing assignments. Content that allows Black males to read about and discuss their everyday experiences as valid and valued perspectives is crucial to enhancing their educational experience. The reset that distance learning afforded teachers and schools all over the world is the perfect opportunity to reimagine seminal readings and

assignments. Teachers should take this moment to ensure that classroom time (albeit virtual and distant for some) is engaging for them. How might one ascertain what students find most engaging? Ask them. Black males should be active participants in the design process of *their* learning. Teachers can make virtual learning fun by including mixed media, e.g., videos, TikTok, music, and art.¹⁰ Educators should discuss current events and the state of the world with students, because they are certainly having these conversations with their peers and others via social media. Ask their opinions on their surroundings and the state of issues in their communities. Lesson plans can also incorporate competitions and activities that allow students to tap into their creativity and use the technology they have on hand.

The virtual classroom should also incorporate activities that require students to step outside, even if it is briefly. Activities that allow them to reimagine and restructure their environments and realities are amongst the most important. Due to COVID-19, the world is forever changed and Black males have rich perspectives on how things should move forward, as do all students. In order to get an understanding of their values and priorities, engage them in a “create your own school” activity. Ask the students what they cherish. Let them tell you what they are lacking and what aspects of schools need to be highlighted and built upon. When students feel like their voices are heard, they are more likely to share their opinions and commit to learning and building community. Educators and students now have a chance to reimagine the new norms and re-enter schools in a way that is equitable or at least marching in the right direction.

4. Listen to Black Males & Center Their Experiences

One of the most fundamental steps that educators can take is to listen to Black males. A growing body of research centers on the utility of listening to Black males, humanizing Black males, and cen-

tering their experiences as integral to how we respond to them in this moment.¹¹ Social studies educators have long documented the value of centering student voice in school content; in this moment, we need to heed that call in a much more emphatic and empathetic way. In a moment where many educators have committed themselves to becoming anti-racist and to disrupting anti-Black racism, listening to the voices of Black males

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means seeking their input about assignments in class, and talking to them about their interests outside of class, as well as having a persistent number of formal and informal conversations about current events, life goals, dreams, and ambitions. In this moment, a powerful tool as a point for conversation is what Black males think could work/or not work with the re-opening of schools. The centering of Black males’ experiences also means incorporating our content with themes, storylines, and characters that speak to the experiences of Black males, Black people, stories, and history.¹² The other area to probe is how Black males make meaning of the current racial climate in our society, and in our schools and classrooms. Be mindful of the honest assessment that many Black males will give about schools, curriculum, teachers, instruction, and their experiences in general. The honesty may be refreshing and indicting at the same time. Yet if we

want to truly support Black males, hearing their voices is crucial.

5. Build Positive, Empathetic Relationships

Building relationships is an essential part of learning.¹³ Arguably the most important step that educators can take in supporting Black males is to build and sustain culturally responsive, honest, and caring relationships. There is no set recipe for how this can be done. These relationships will look different with each student. One straightforward and simple way to start is with conversations. They can go a long way to building rapport, trust, and understanding. We would also recommend an interest survey as a tool that can be shared between teacher and student. Assigning a survey as students’ first homework assignment is a great way to show students that you are eager to learn about them. Feel free to share some of your own answers to the survey as a way of showing students that your classroom is a place where people’s real selves are welcome. When given at the beginning of the year, the survey can help create a first impression of the student as created by the student. Who does the student want the teacher to know he/she/they are? Those choices of self-representation are important. As educator Sara Ahmed says, “We often ask kids to put themselves in someone else’s shoes before we give them the opportunity to voice what it is like to be in their own shoes.”¹⁴

There are a wide variety of student interest surveys available. We encourage teachers to create their own surveys to reflect what they want to know about their students. Of course, a student interest survey only works if we hold onto what students share in meaningful ways. After collecting and reading student surveys, we could use the survey to:

- Identify some shared topics of interest in the class and invite students to brainstorm some ways the class might explore those interests throughout the year;

- Identify opportunities throughout the year to explore individual interests;
- Ask students to consider what they wrote and use it to brainstorm a set of classroom goals;
- Use the survey to launch individual student conferences that discuss what the student wants to happen as a learner that year and what you as a teacher want.

6. Acknowledge the Diversity in Black Males: Anti-Essentialism

One of the more overlooked realities in schools is the vast array of variability that exists within subgroups. Perhaps no groups suffer more from this than Black males. Simply stated, not all Black males are the same. Even our current list of steps should be taken with caution because some of these suggestions may not lead to better experiences, connections, and relationships. Borrowing from feminist theory, we invoke the importance of anti-essentialism. Grillo and many other feminist scholars contend that essentialism is the notion that there is “a single woman’s, or Black person’s, or any other group’s experience that can be described independently from other aspects of the person—that there is an ‘essence’ to that experience.”¹⁵ Moreover, she explains that “an essentialist outlook assumes that the experience of being a member of the group under discussion is a stable one, one with a clear meaning, a meaning constant through time, space, and different historical, social, political, and personal contexts.”¹⁶ In other words, essentialism assumes that a Black male student experiences the same educational system as that of a White male student—that there is a “male student educational experience”—stripping away how race affects the experiences of each member.

Anti-essentialism, on the other hand, contends that each factor or variable—such as race, class, sexual orientation, social status, and gender—contributes

to one’s composition and no one variable can be subtracted from one’s identity. An anti-essentialist approach would include examining realities from a group of young men that we rarely hear about in the professional literature and society writ-large: high performing Black males.¹⁷ We take this intentional approach by (1) disrupting the narrative that all or most young men of color are not performing well academically, (2) highlighting the variation in their lives and circumstances, and (3) centering their voices in naming and describing their humanity in spaces that often essentialize and dehumanize them. Finally, the intersectionality and complexity of Black males reminds us that Black males who are of mixed race, Black males who are immigrants born outside of the United States, and Black males who are gender non-conforming should all be part of our understanding of how Black males experience schools, think about their identities, and navigate their worlds; and even within these subgroups there is great variation.

7. Mental Health Matters

An area that has largely been absent in the discussion of Black males is the salience of mental health. Over the last three decades, there has been a disturbing increase in adolescent mental health issues. According to researchers, Black adolescent depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation has increased significantly.¹⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified these issues, and teachers must be mindful of the effects on Black males. Frequently, students who are dealing with mental health challenges can exhibit a wide range of behaviors including disengagement, anger, despondence, and lack of participation while in school. This is prevalent for Black males in particular due to the disproportionately high rates at which they are suspended from schools. Practitioners must recognize the root causes of students’ behaviors and seek restorative rather than punitive approaches in dealing with students. Many Black males,

like all other students, continue to deal with grief, loss, pain, and a multitude of emotions that the pandemic has wrought. Let’s give Black males the permission to feel and exhibit the full range of human emotions without gross consequences. Thus, it is vital that schools think about an increased presence of counselors, social workers, therapists, and school psychologists in schools that Black males attend.

Conclusion

To be clear, what benefits Black males are many of the same things that benefit all students. Care, support, relationships, responsive and engaging curriculum, and a fundamental belief in their promise and potential make a difference in students’ outcomes and experiences in schools. Our ask is that teachers in this moment demonstrate a renewed commitment to how they see Black male students. As schools reopen, we have a rare opportunity to completely redesign the way that schools see and support Black males. 🌍

Notes

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