

Erasing Deficits

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In this epilogue to the special issue, two White House officials and policy experts describe how negative narratives surrounding Black men and the misuse of data can manifest as barriers to high quality learning environments or workforce development opportunities.

“Erasing the Deficits: My Brother’s Keeper and Contemporary Perspectives on Black Male School Achievement” enhances the dialogue on Black male achievement by establishing a research agenda for Black males that celebrates and acknowledges their strength and resilience. For decades, research on young Black males has focused on the “problems” surrounding or caused by Black men, frequently sensationalizing the odds against them. Often, young Black males’ voices are set against the backdrop of social invectives and shortsighted analyses. Research on young Black males typically assumes all Black males share the same experience—archetypes of Black male types are recycled in narratives that rely upon ill-conceived and poorly sourced statistics (for example, people frequently suggest there are more Black men in prison than in college when the reality is there are more than 600,000 Black men in post-secondary programs than there are in prison and we question whether the “fact” has ever been true) (Toldson & Morton, 2011).

Negative narratives surrounding Black men and the misuse of data have real consequences and can manifest as barriers to high quality learning environments or workforce development opportunities. Opportunity should not be informed by stereotypes, hyperbole and conjecture. “Erasing the Deficits: My Brother’s Keeper and Contemporary Perspectives on Black Male School Achievement” underscores the importance of a meaningful interpretation of the data and a compassionate understanding of opportunities to support Black males.

DEFICIT PERSPECTIVES ON BLACK MALES

Deficit perspectives on the development of Black males have been ubiquitous in scholarly literature and public policy for more than a half of a century (Dodge, 2008; Haegerich, Salerno, & Bottoms, 2013; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2002). In 1965, the Department of Labor assistant secretary under President Lyndon Johnson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, developed a report that summarized what he considered to be the central problem facing the Black community—a family structure devoid of a positive father figure (Wilson, 2009). The idea that young Black males exhibit antisocial behaviors because of fatherlessness remains a popular supposition today, despite no empirical research that links father absence to delinquency and research to support the contributions made by fathers who do not cohabitate (Toldson & Lemmons, 2013).

In the 1980s violent crime among Black youth and the number of Black youth living in single-parent households both sharply increased, leaving suspicions that young African Americans were reacting to a more fragile family structure with violence. However, the relationship between single-parent households and violence ceased to exist in the late 1990s. During this period violent crime among Black youth plummeted, while the percentage of Black children living in single-parent households continued to rise (Toldson, 2012).

In the 1990s, “superpredators” was frequently evoked by the media to forecast a conjectural threat from future generations of Black teenagers (Haegerich et al., 2013). Popularized by a noted researcher and senior official in President George H. W. Bush’s administration, the term superpredator described a predictive analysis that linked unprecedented levels of crime to increasing representations of boys of color in the U.S. population. However, the crime rate among subsequent generations of Black teenagers did not reach dangerous and unprecedented levels. In fact, the crime rate experienced an unprecedented plunge, and has now reached pre-1980s levels (Haegerich et al., 2013; Toldson, 2012).

Although data does not support negative, low expectations of Black males, too many educators continue to expect the worst of Black male teenagers today. Confirmation bias prevents too many from accepting the fact that teenagers today are less violent and more academically engaged. In spite of data that suggests the opposite, too often we view loving, caring, and smart Black teenagers as violent and disengaged.

Deficit perspectives cause educators and caring adults to have lower expectation for young Black males. The second author of this epilogue has frequently spoken about fellow educators citing the mistruth that there are more Black men in prison than in college as an excuse to avoid investing

the time and effort into supporting the learning and development of Black male students. In a documentary called *Tale of Two Schools*, at a predominately White public high school in Long Island, New York, the guidance counselor told her student that he needed a “reach” school. Only a few miles away, at a predominately Black public high school in Long Island, a Black guidance counselor convinced a Black student with a B average that he needed to apply to a “safe” school, i.e., a community college.

Similarly, during a professional development workshop, the first author of this epilogue showed a video clip of a young Black male describing his feelings of anxiety and despondency when he had to pass through metal detectors and encounter teachers that seemed like they “didn’t want to be there.” A high school administrator who watched the clip shrugged her shoulders and said, “He needs to tell his friends to stop bringing weapons to the school.” Notably, the administrator worked in a different district, and did not know the child in the film. While not intended to be representative, these examples highlight how attitudes can guide practice in ways that ignore systemic inequity and data.

ERASING A DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE

It is essential to employ an asset framework when thinking about ways to support Black males. To accomplish this we must first disrupt and supplant the tendency to describe everything we think is wrong with Black males and the communities we imagine them to come from. For example, often, when asking people who work with Black males in educational settings to describe their students’ neighborhoods, phrases like “crime-ridden,” “broken homes,” and “drug-infested” are used. Beyond serving as examples of how popular narratives overessentialize and misrepresent the experiences of many, this approach yields very little useful data. A more meaningful strategy for capturing the complexity of the experiences of Black males and to understanding resilience is to ask successful Black men, “How did you grow up under what most consider to be difficult circumstances and become successful?” This question will spur a more meaningful dialogue that properly celebrates community assets, hope, and resilience.

Young Black males are keenly aware of the challenges and opportunities they face (Johns 2007). Often, they are less clear about how to capitalize on unique opportunities for character building, leadership, and civic engagement. It is important for caring adults, especially those in spaces young Black men are likely to traverse, to be aware of and find ways to increase access to opportunities that allow the young men to learn and develop. This must occur with special sensitivity to supplanting negative notions of what Black men are capable of accomplishing (or not).

In addition to challenging the ways many people problematize Black male youth it is important to challenge prevailing understandings of what constitutes success. For example, some Black students are told to define success by isolating themselves from Black peers to prepare themselves for success in environments where African American students are in the minority. Rather than suggesting Black students distance themselves from their communities a more meaningful approach would be to celebrate community—encouraging students to work to support one another in ways that improve their community and the country. The research contained in this special issue seeks to redefine standards of success and strategies for supporting the learning and development of Black male youth in ways that are more affirming, engaging, and relevant.

ERASING DEFICITS

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education released the Civil Rights Data Collection report. The study suggests that the opportunity gaps that exist between Black and White males across the country center around three key areas: (1) Schools routinely offer Black children a less rigorous curriculum that omit classes required for college admission; (2) schools discipline Black males more harshly by suspending them for behaviors (e.g., tardiness) that rarely result in suspensions among White males; and (3) Black students are the most likely to have the lowest paid teachers with the fewest years of classroom experience, and who become teachers through alternative teacher certification programs (Toldson, 2014).

In a national survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 87% of Black students who were in the ninth grade in 2009 were in the 11th grade by 2012 (Toldson, 2014). About 64% of Black high school males expect to eventually graduate from college. However, Black students are behind their peers in the percent who are taking college preparatory classes. Fifty-three percent of Asian students, 24% of White students, 16% of Hispanic students, and 12% of Black students are taking pre-calculus or calculus by the 11th grade (Toldson, 2014).

Research and the government have a role to play in expanding educational access to school-age Black males. Without the best research, the government is ill equipped to optimize the coordination of proactive and proven strategies to support the learning and development of all Black males. We hope that the research contained in this volume will be used to craft policy solutions and inform practice that accelerates the academic progress of school-age Black males. We also hope that good research, like that contained in this volume, will also change the public perception that

young Black males are disaffected and incapable of adapting to the educational system, because the opposite is true.

In February 2014, President Obama launched My Brother's Keeper—a new initiative to help every boy and young man of color break barriers and succeed in school and in life. The My Brother's Keeper initiative builds on the work of communities and institutions adopting asset-based, antideficit approaches to promote success among males of color. Antideficit research can contribute to the national agenda to help Black males to reach their full potential, contribute to their communities and build successful lives for themselves and their families.

The White House Initiative on HBCUs (WHIHBCUs) and the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans will work with the academic community and the Interagency Task Force that will oversee My Brother's Keeper to accomplish the following:

- Survey male initiatives at two year and four year post-secondary institutions including Historically Black Colleges and Universities and antideficit research to contribute to the administration-wide “What Works” online portal to disseminate successful programs and practices that improve outcomes for boys and young men of color;
- Confer with antideficit researchers to recommend critical indicators of life outcomes for boys and young men of color for a comprehensive public website, to be maintained by the U.S. Department of Education;
- Connect scholars to the philanthropic and corporate partners supporting My Brother's Keeper so that they can learn how to access the revenue necessary to start and sustain programs for boys and young men of color;
- Use research and programs published by antideficit scholars to recommend Federal policies, regulations, and programs that would benefit boys and young men of color and innovative strategies and practices for providing opportunities to and improving lives for Black males; and
- Share findings from this work with the White House Council on Women and Girls to ensure that best practices found to benefit boys and men of color are also considered when identifying strategies to support women and girls (as well as students who do not fit within gender binaries).

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