

## **Mentoring to Reduce Racial Disproportionality of African-American Discipline Citations**

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### **Abstract**

African-American boys in schools receive more out-of-school suspensions than any other student population. In 2019, one urban school district found 24.6% of their conduct citations came from African-American boys; although, African-American boys represented only 18.5% of the student population. In response to this disproportionality, the school district partnered with a public university to create a pilot mentoring program for 6th grade boys who identify as Black or African-American. Using an Equity Design Team (EDT) model consisting of school, university, and community members to generate solutions, the EDT co-created a mentoring program specifically for African-American males in Grade 6 who were previously marginalized. Twelve African-American men from the community, ages 24-62 agreed to serve as mentors to 13 African-American boys in one middle school. A control group (n=34) was formed from the African-American males who did not receive mentoring and who attended two other middle schools in the district. Preliminary results after 9 weeks revealed one significant quantitative difference between experimental and control groups. The African-American males in the mentoring group received significantly more detentions ( $p=.007$ ) from their teachers than did African-American males in the control group. Within group dependent t-test analysis showed significant improvement ( $p=.001$ ) in mentee science grades from 1.07 GPA to 2.18 GPA. No significant differences were noted in other course subjects or attendance. Planned analyses for subsequent grading periods were interrupted because of COVID-19. A focus group was conducted with nine mentors and four school staff following the death of George Floyd to discuss next steps. Qualitatively, two themes emerged from the mentor data: the role of social activism to create change and minority stress experienced by the mentors.

### **Literature Review**

Black male students are issued more behavior referrals from teachers than other races. This disproportionality affects students and teachers in several ways such as increased dropout rates, lower standardized test scores, and teachers' decisions to leave the profession (Monroe, 2006).

School-to-prison pipeline is a term that acknowledges that because of structural, systemic, institutional, and societal barriers that foster inequity, inequality, racism and other forms of discrimination, certain students are destined for prison (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019). Research shows that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. While the U.S. represents 5% of the world's population, it accounts for roughly 25% of the world's prison population, and incarceration is disproportionately distributed across the population. People of color (African-American, Latino, and Native-American) make up about 30% of the U.S. population but account for approximately 60% of the prison population (The Sentencing Project, 2017). Furthermore, a Black male in the U.S. has a 1-in-3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime.

Data clearly demonstrate that race (Howard, 2010) and poverty (Milner, 2015) matter in education and society. Disrupting the School-to-prison pipeline requires serious attention to both class and race and the intersection of the two (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019). Both in-school and out-of-school factors contribute to this problem, and culturally responsive mentoring grounded in Critical Race Theory (Stefancic & Delgado, 2012) can positively affect change for Black males. This mentoring must focus on mentees' strengths and must not support a deficit perspective. Following the principles of Critical Race Theory, mentoring, like education, should focus on eliminating the inequity and providing opportunities in the society and institutions rather than trying to "fix" the mentees. To avoid marginalizing Black males even further, effective mentoring programming should address implicit bias, systemic racism, and racial socialization (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019).

The more traumatic life experiences a person has the more likely they are to have learning and behavioral issues in school (Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Carrion, 2011). Specifically, students who were exposed to two or more traumatic life experiences were almost three times more likely to have to repeat a grade, more likely to miss at least two weeks of school, and are much less likely to be engaged in school activities (Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, & Halfon, 2014).

Researchers have captured the psychological effects that racial discrimination has had on Black Americans (Anderson, McKenny, Stevenson, 2018). The resulting racial stress and trauma from experiences with racial discrimination have been linked to negative wellness outcomes for Black youth and families. Racial socialization is defined as the verbal and nonverbal messages, such as celebrating cultural heritage, that families use to communicate race to their children which can be a cultural strength and has been associated with positive outcomes in Black youth (Anderson, McKenny, Stevenson, 2019). According to the Culturally Responsive Mentoring Participants' Workbook (2016), "There can be big differences among cultural groups about how people come to know things. European cultures tend to believe that information acquired through cognitive means (counting, measuring) is more valid than other ways of gathering information. African cultures prefer symbolic imagery and rhythm as a mode of learning." Black male mentors can promote positive racial socialization when working with Black male mentees.

### **Methodology**

The study took place at a large urban school district located in the Northeast United States. All male students who identified as Black or African-American attending three middle schools in the district were divided into two groups. Group membership was determined by the

student's middle school enrollment. African-American boys attending Schools A and B (n=34) were assigned to the control group while African-American boys attending School C (n=13) were assigned to the experimental group and invited to participate in the mentoring program. Twelve African-American men from the local community were invited to participate in mentor training, and to serve as mentors for one year to the African-American boys attending School C. Parental consent and FBI criminal background clearances for mentors were obtained and maintained by the school district.

The mentoring program for this study was co-created by an Equity Design Team (EDT) consisting of school, university, and community members in response to the disproportional behavioral referrals made by the teachers in the school district. The program began January 2020 with the goals to support student academic outcomes, reduce school discipline referrals, and encourage regular school attendance for the African-American boys attending School C.

During bi-weekly mentoring sessions, 13 boys from School C completed activities and discussions with their mentors as facilitated by the university mentoring coordinator. The topics discussed included self-advocacy, self-efficacy, confidence, college and career, celebrating local Black history and social activism. In addition, the mentees read the book *We Beat the Street: How a Friendship Pact Led to Success* by Davis, Jenkins, and Hunt (2005). Family members of each mentee were invited to meals at the school library and to participate in conversations with mentors and their sons after each session.

In March 2020, COVID-19 impacted the program and several modifications became necessary because of the state-wide school closure. For example, pizza was delivered to each mentee's home and the cohort sessions were conducted online. Another change was the way the mentors and mentees communicated. Originally, mentors and mentees met in person in the school building; however, sessions were moved to an online format because of Stay at Home orders dictated by the Governor. Additionally, in May 2020 the murder of George Floyd was addressed during subsequent mentoring sessions -- a significant event in the lives of these Black male mentors and mentees as the local protests were held in their neighborhoods. Considering these two significant societal events (COVID-19 and George Floyd's death), the program curriculum was adjusted to meet the present lived experiences of both mentors and mentees.

Recognizing that mentoring is an evolving process that ebbs and flows, the voices of participants and their lived experiences cannot be ignored. To provide a space for this work, a focus group with the mentors was conducted ten days after the death of George Floyd. Nine mentors and four school personnel (i.e., Assistant Superintendent, Community Liaison, Family Coordinator, and the Principal from School C) participated. The focus group was facilitated by the university mentoring coordinator using Zoom video with the purpose to provide the mentors and school personnel with an opportunity to share feelings and build bonding as well as to modify the mentoring program in light of the global events.

Using a naturalistic case study inquiry approach (Merriam, 1998), three interview question prompts were provided to the participants in advance of the meeting. The questions were: 1) How are you feeling? 2) How do we respond to the mentees in light of what is happening with the Black Lives Matter protests? 3) What is next?

Video and audio of the meeting were recorded using the Zoom platform. Audio responses were then transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word. Each participant's transcribed responses were analyzed using a content analysis open coding procedure to identify emergent themes. Data were organized according to each interview question to identify patterns (Glaser, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Findings

Analysis revealed two major themes from the mentors. "Minority stress" from their recent lived experiences, and the promotion of social activism as a strategy for change. These themes were supported by various subthemes in the data.

### Minority Stress

Ongoing systemic and persistent racism inherent within the criminal justice system combined with the lived experiences for persons of color who are often subjected to bias and violence can manifest into negative health effects. In schools, minority stress is propagated by unconscious teacher bias and actions towards Black students in part due to the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019). According to Ng, Ward, Shea, Hart, Guerino, and Scholle (2019), minority stress is "chronic stress resulting from experiences or perceptions of unfair treatment or abusive behavior based on belonging to a stigmatized minority group. The minority stress model is a framework for conceptualizing how experiences unique to minority groups—prejudice and discrimination, in particular—confer chronic psychological stress and heightened physiological responses that impact mental and physical health over time" (p. 54).

Several informants in the focus group expressed mental health and exhaustion concerns related to their experience as African-American males. For instance, a local artist, age 28, employed at the admissions office of a local post-secondary art school said,

Dealing with the pandemic, and then on top of that the protests and everything else that's happening. My mental health hasn't been in the best state, so I've been trying to find different ways to get myself out of this funk of like, how do I not overwhelm myself with all of the news coming in and seeing all of those people outside in one place and then understanding that all of those people are out there for a cause and are trying to make change.

In addition, an information technology computer scientist, age 26, employed by a large company stated,

I share the same symptom of having to have the difficult conversations of the next day, let's talk about it. I'm one of four people in the entire organization for who is Black and who is in the corporate office, so that whole conversation coming up every day is just too much. Now all of the sudden the company wants to have a diversity initiative and wants me to sit on it. It's just too much, and I understand what's going on, but these are conversations that I've had prior to this happening, and so now that it's impacting the company directly, now it's time to do something. So, I'm physically and mentally tired.

## Social Activism

According to the children's literature book *Rise Up! The Art of Protest* (Rippon, 2020), which was developed in collaboration with Amnesty International and written for students ages 8-12, young people should be encouraged to participate in peaceful protest and stand up for freedom. Several informants discussed the role that social activism plays and the direct role of peaceful protest to inform and change policy.

One of the mentors, a retired State-police officer and current church pastor, age 60, stated, "It really makes me reconsider my position -- in how we are going to teach and mentor our kiddos about what is, as far as what protests and boycotts actually are, and what their true purposes are." Later in the meeting he said, "...maybe consider taking them to a protest or two, then have a follow-up meeting afterward to see what their reflection is, and what questions they still may have about this entire realm of civil rights and politics."

The family community liaison for the school district, a Latina age 37, echoed the importance of activism, but also expressed caution in how the boys should be educated about social activism. She said, "I think it's real important what we say, and how we say it. They're kids, and you know they can easily take our words and think like we're telling them to go downtown and blow something up. You know, they're gonna follow what we say and how we say it. I think that was my main concern of us getting together and having a discussion [in this meeting], it's like, what does it look like, and you know, how does it sound? Because when it comes to these teens, [the] young black boys, we have influence, so we really have to be careful of what we say and how we say it."

Regarding the question prompt, "What's next?," the Assistant Superintendent, an African-American woman in her mid-50s exclaimed, "Activism is a role, something that folks can do as a career. You can say I want to be a community activist. I want to be a social activist, so you get a cause and you stick to that cause. [This career field is for students who realize they] can't ignore what's happening in the world, [and for them] to try to make these connections [between career choice and individual passions]."

## Pre-Post Mentoring Results

This mixed method study also investigated several quantitative factors such as student grades, attendance, and behavioral referrals. Preliminary dependent t-tests conducted after the 9-week grading period revealed statistically significant differences ( $p=0.01$ ) between pre-mentoring and some-mentoring (i.e., after the 9-week data collection period). The experimental group science grades improved from 1.07 GPA to 2.18 GPA. Independent t-tests conducted between the experimental and control groups, however, indicated significant differences ( $p=0.07$ ) in the number of student detentions. The experimental group received more detentions. Additional planned analyses for subsequent grading periods were interrupted because of COVID-19 and schools being closed, although mentoring sessions continued to occur remotely. Once school resumes again, the self-efficacy post questionnaire will be given to mentees. In addition, new focus groups and a post statistical analysis will investigate the power of mentoring to reduce racial disproportionality of African-American discipline citations in one school district.

## Conclusions

African-American male students receive more discipline citations from teachers than any other student group. To avoid further marginalization of Black students, the curriculum for this program focused on developing cultural pride, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, confidence, college and career exploration. Unfortunately, the boys in the mentoring group received more detentions from their teachers. At present, it is unclear why this difference between groups occurred. Perhaps the experimental group students lived in a lower socio-economic section of the city, which can impact grades, attendance and behavior referrals? Perhaps the lived experiences of mentees were more traumatic than those of the control group students? Perhaps the mentees received more detentions from their teachers because of different (or higher) behavior standards than the other two schools? Perhaps there was a backlash effect towards the African-American males by the teachers in the building who subconsciously sabotaged the mentoring program which was highly touted by district officials including the Superintendent? Or perhaps, implicit bias has always been present at the school, which prompted the mentoring program to be developed in the first place? Further investigation will explore these questions as the mentoring program continues.

The advent of COVID-19 and the protests about racial injustices magnified the intentional need for the curriculum to be even more culturally responsive to the mentees' lived experiences. Data collected during focus groups indicated that the mentors experienced minority stress and a desire to teach their mentees about the power of social activism to evoke change. During informal conversations, mentees reported that they wanted to know how they can participate in the change so this will be a part of their personal legacy. Effective mentoring needs to be flexible and culturally responsive to the needs of both mentors and mentees. Within this context, relationship building is fundamental. The mentoring program described in this paper focused on bonding and goal setting, and promoted belongingness through shared meals between mentees, their mentors and their families. Belongingness was also fostered through slogan building. To encourage bonding, the mentees in collaboration with mentors generated a team name called "The Brotherhood" along with their slogan: "Act right. Be right. Do right!" and a rhythmic call-and-response: I am a King. I am a Lion (school mascot). I

am worthy and I believe in myself!" Tee-shirts with the group's name and slogan were created from ideas generated by the mentees. These important foundational elements of mentoring encourage buy-in and proved especially important when school was closed due to COVID-19. These trusting relationships established before the social-distancing lock down assisted the school district in being able to provide laptop computers to mentees so that virtual mentoring could occur. Offering a space for mentors to share their feelings about Black men being murdered by police and other current events further solidified bonds.

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