Developing Policies to Respond to the Challenges Confronting African American and Latino Males

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RISE

FOR BOYS AND MEN OF COLOR

In American society, black males are overrepresented in categories typically associated with hardship and defeat. They experience disproportionately high rates of unemployment, incarceration, homicide, and many of them are so disenfranchised (approximately 34 percent of black males between ages 16 and 34) that they are literally "missing" from key census data because they are neither working, in school or college, or in the criminal justice system (Patterson 2015, 50).

These patterns are pervasive throughout the United States, and they have been in place for many years. Rather than urgency, there is a profound and disturbing sense of resignation about our ability as a nation to counter these dismal trends. However, there are a number of promising programs and initiatives in various communities across the country that suggest change may be possible (Noguera 2013). This paper is designed to draw attention to the policy principles that would allow such interventions to grow and be replicated.

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Altering Outcomes Through Education

The marginality of black and, to a great extent, Latino males, is particularly evident in education. On all of the indicators of academic achievement, educational attainment, and school success, black males are distinguished from other segments of the American population by their consistent clustering in categories associated with underachievement (Schott 2010). In most schools and districts throughout the United States, black, and in many cases Latino, males are overrepresented in educational categories typically associated with failure and sub-par academic performance: dropout and suspension rates, special education placements, and college readiness (Noguera 2014). Similarly, in indicators associated with success—enrollment in honors, gifted classes, and advanced placement courses, matriculation to college, and degree attainment— black and Latino males tend to be vastly underrepresented. With few exceptions, these dismal patterns are evident in urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout the United States, even in communities with relatively small minority populations (Patterson 2015). Nationally, black and Latino males are more likely than any other group to be suspended, expelled, or arrested while in school (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010), and more likely to be identified for special education and placed in the most restrictive learning environments (Orfield and Losen 2002).

A recent report on racial disparities in education by the US Department of Education Civil Rights Division (2014) showed that 20 percent of Black boys and more than 10 percent of black girls received an out-of-school suspension, compared to 9 percent of Hispanic boys and 4 percent of Hispanic girls and 7 percent of white boys and 3 percent of white girls. Similarly, a 2011 study of suspension patterns among ninth graders in the state of Texas revealed that 83 percent of black males and 74 percent of Latino males in the study were suspended at least once, and one in seven students in the study was suspended at least 11 times (2011).

In several studies on the marginalization of black and Latino males, scholars have attributed the challenges they face to a broad range of cultural factors, including hyper masculinity (Patterson 2015), the adoption of a "cool pose" (Majors and Billison 1992), and oppositional attitudes toward learning (Anderson 1990). The empirical evidence supporting these claims is scant. However, there is considerable evidence that policy focused on changing the *structure of opportunity* can influence educational outcomes and performance. This includes expanding access to highly effective teachers and supportive schools (Fergus et al. 2014), high-quality preschool and afterschool programs (Villavicenico et al. 2014), and well-designed youth development and job training programs (Young 2006).

To counter the educational and social challenges facing Latino and black males on a larger scale, new policies must be devised. Most of the existing policy strategies aimed at addressing the needs of males of color are reactive, fragmented, and more often than not, narrow in scope.[1] For example, mentoring has frequently been embraced as a favored intervention to support disadvantaged minority males. However, on its own, mentoring is largely inadequate and insufficient for addressing the broad set of economic challenges confronting black and Latino men and boys. Similarly, many of the initiatives that have been funded by foundations and launched by municipal governments, have largely focused narrowly on specific problems, such as reducing dropout rates and gang violence. While such initiatives are clearly important, most fail to address the underlying systemic causes of these problems, namely, concentrated poverty, the weaknesses of public schools, and the lack of jobs.

A new policy approach must foster the creation of more integrated and holistic support systems, and they must extend well beyond the confines of schools. Strategies aimed at increasing parental engagement, positive peer influences, access to afterschool and summer programs, employment, and job training must be included because all have been found to have a positive impact on long-term academic and social outcomes (Slavin et al. 1998; Fergus et al. 2014).

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[1] For a discussion of the limitations of current policies aimed at addressing the needs of black males, see Council of Great City Schools, *A Call for Change* (Washington, DC: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

The following policy recommendations are offered in the hope that significant progress can be made through well-developed, local, state, and federal initiatives. However, there is an obvious limitation to the ideas put forward here; they are offered without a plan for raising the funds to support and sustain them. This is by no means a trivial matter. Promising initiatives cannot be sustained if they are based on charity and the vagaries of philanthropy. There is a need for significant public and private investments to ensure that effective interventions and "best practices" can be supported. In some cases, funds may have to be redirected from related initiatives that have proven far less effective, such as the juvenile justice system. In cities and counties throughout the country, millions of dollars are spent each year on a system that largely keeps young men of color trapped in a cycle of failure.[2]

The following policy principles can be utilized as the basis for the development of programs and interventions that are modified and adapted to meet the needs of particular communities and cities.
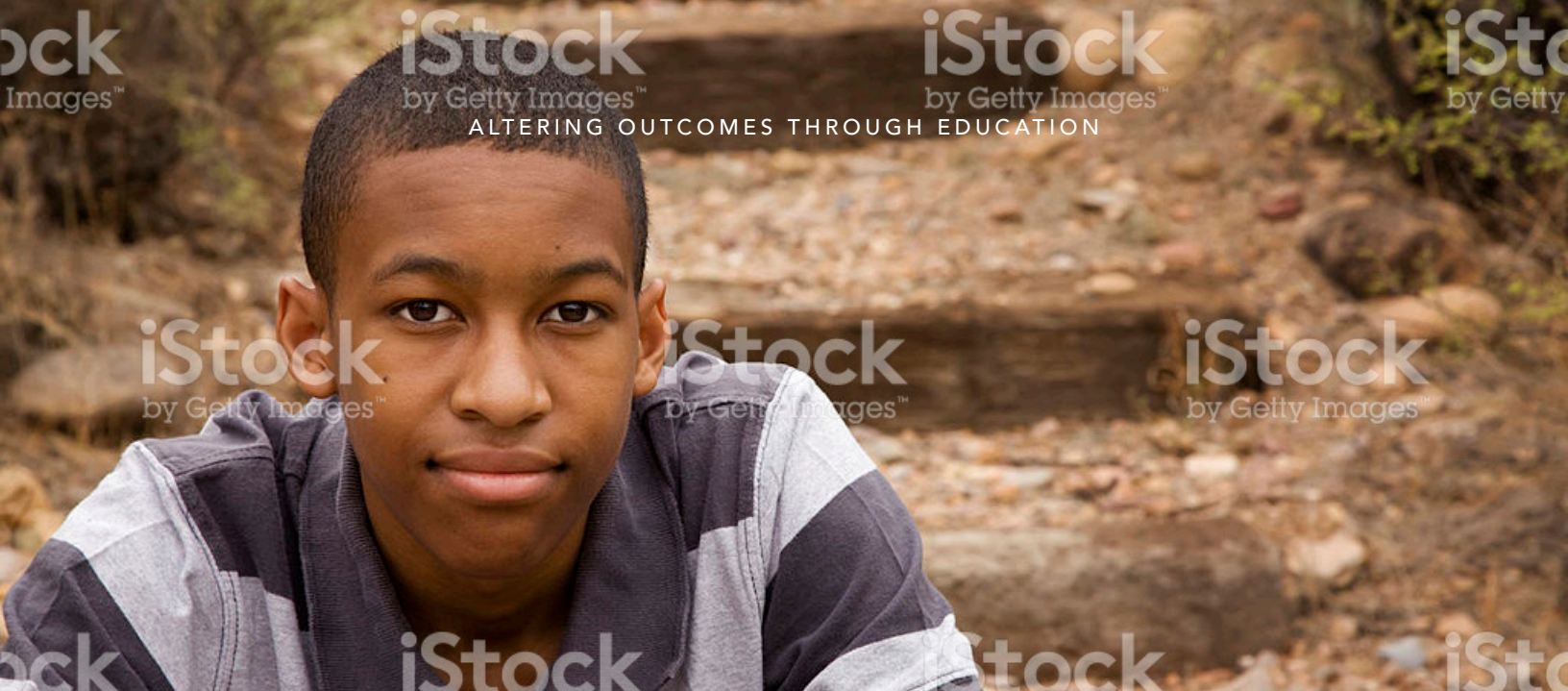
1 — *Educational interventions should be implemented early based on the establishment of benchmarks that indicate the emergence of warning signs.*

The educational hardships and difficulties experienced by black and Latino boys must be addressed as soon as they manifest. For example, there is substantial evidence that programs that aim to ensure reading proficiency by the third grade can have a positive impact upon high school graduation and college attendance (Boykin and Noguera 2011; Kirp 2011). Early literacy initiatives are relatively inexpensive, and targeted interventions that provide personalized support to children in need can be implemented early. Several states and school districts have adopted policies to end "social promotion,"[3] however, in most cases, these efforts have done little to help students who do not meet grade-level expectations other than requiring them to repeat the grade—a practice shown to increase the likelihood of dropping out (Mimms et al. 2001). The most effective interventions include a plan to diagnose the learning needs of students who have fallen behind and to provide access to high-quality interventions (e.g., reading recovery and other Response to Intervention [RTI] programs) that have been shown to be effective (Slavin et al. 1989).

Early interventions should include increased access to quality early childhood programs (Kirp 2011), expanded access to extended learning opportunities (after school and during the summer) (Wade and Noguera 2011), targeted interventions to promote literacy proficiency, and for dual language development (for children whose first language is not English) during the elementary years to ensure that students have the literacy skills required to succeed in secondary school (Shonkoff 2000). A vast body of research has shown that these types of early interventions can be very effective in reducing risks and improving academic outcomes for male students of color (Fashola and Slavin 1997; Rothstein 2004; Kirp 2011).

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[2] A recent report found that locking up a juvenile costs states an average of $407.58 per person per day and $148,767 {Q: The sentence is incomplete. What costs $148,767?}. For an analysis of the costs of juvenile incarceration and the failures of the system, see *The Costs of Confinement: Why Good Juvenile Justice Policies Make Good Fiscal Sense* (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2009).

[3] Social promotion is the term used for students who are promoted to a higher grade because of their age and because they have met the academic requirements for promotion.

(2) *Policy interventions should be holistic and adopt an integrated approach to address educational needs.*

Policy interventions must be designed in a comprehensive manner to respond to the broad range of economic, social, psychological, and emotional needs that impact child development and social welfare. For example, research has shown that the most effective programs to reduce recidivism among formerly incarcerated youth include a focus on their educational and employment needs, as well as their need for guidance and mentoring (Earls 1991; Pollard 1993). Programs such as Youth Build and Homeboy Industries have proven to be particularly effective in reducing recidivism because of the comprehensive approach they take to address the needs of formerly incarcerated youth (Justice Center 2014).

Similarly, discipline policies in school are most effective when they do not merely focus on applying punishments for inappropriate and disruptive behavior. The most effective discipline practices address the underlying factors that contribute to behavior problems (Sandler 2000; Noguera 2008). Research shows that the most effective approaches to school discipline include strategies to address the social and emotional causes of behavior problems and include a plan to reconnect offending students to the goals and purpose of school (Girabaldi 1992; Fergus and Noguera 2010).

Additionally, interventions that are aimed at changing individual behavior (e.g., raising achievement or reducing school discipline problems) should also involve efforts to transform the institutions that serve young men so that they become more responsive to addressing their needs. For example, research has shown that serious efforts to increase college enrollment must focus both on the changes that individual students need to make (e.g., improved study habits, more proactive help-seeking, etc.) as well as changes that are needed in the structure and climate of schools and colleges (Villavicencio 2014; Fergus et al. 2014). Similarly, several studies have shown that schools and community-based programs that are successful in positively influencing academic and social outcomes for young men of color employ adults who are well trained, highly skilled, and culturally competent, meaning they have the ability to build strong relationships with the young men they serve, and, if necessary, to transcend differences in race, class, language, and culture (McLaughlin 2000). Recruiting adults (particularly men) from diverse backgrounds as teachers, social workers, and directors of afterschool programs, and providing them with training, is essential to the success of schools and programs that serve young men of color (Girabaldi 1992; Linn 2012).

3 — Policy interventions must be evaluated regularly and modified based on evidence of effectiveness.

Too often, local communities and school districts adopt programs aimed at addressing a social issue or problem (gang involvement, dropout prevention, youth unemployment, etc.) but fail to carry out effective evaluations of these efforts. In recent years, several major foundations and local governments have launched initiatives to address the "crisis" confronting young men of color, but with few exceptions, most of these efforts have ceased due to a lack of political or ongoing financial support.[4] Sporadic efforts that are not evaluated or assessed for their effectiveness and that are not accompanied by a plan for sustainability, will have little impact upon the complex challenges confronting black and Latino males. Good intentions are not good enough. There must be a plan to sustain and adjust interventions as necessary, if they are to have a lasting, positive impact.

4 — Policy interventions should be sensitive to ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic differences among African American and Latino men and boys.

There is considerable diversity among black and Latino men and boys. Differences in immigration status, national origin, socioeconomic status, geographic location, sexual orientation/identity, educational level, and age all contribute to differences in needs (Waters 1990; Patterson 2015). For this reason, the challenges confronting boys of color must be differentiated and tailored to respond to the particular needs of subgroups.

The most effective interventions will acknowledge differences and be based upon an intersectional approach that recognizes the complex interaction between ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991). Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, special attention must be paid to social context and the ways in which social identities are shaped by the unique conditions in a particular milieu. The needs of the most at-risk youth (e.g., homeless youth, young people in foster care, and those who have already been incarcerated) are very different from those who are middle class and college bound. This is not to suggest that those from somewhat more privileged backgrounds do not require attention and support. The critical point is that programs to support black and Latino males must be sensitive to a wide variety of identity differences. Especially in communities where there are tensions between blacks and Latinos, it is important not to assume that a single initiative focused on the needs of young men will work for all in need.

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[4] For example, under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City launched a number of public and private initiatives in 2011 {Q: What year?} aimed at addressing the needs of black males with the support of philanthropists such as George Soros and the Open Society Institute. However, with the election of Mayor Bill de Blasio in 2014, these initiatives came to a halt and no similar efforts have been undertaken.

5 *Policy interventions should be designed to avoid stigmatizing while providing support.*

There are numerous examples of programs and interventions that were designed to help a particular group but have had the opposite effect. For example, students with low skills who are placed in remedial classes are often taught by inexperienced or poorly trained teachers who are incapable of meeting their needs (Noguera 2008). Similarly, students with diagnosed learning disabilities are often marginalized and underserved despite the existence of a legally recognized intervention plan (Losen and Orfield 2002). As a result, students targeted for support often make little progress despite the label, and the commitment of additional resources to support them. Labeling (e.g., slow, mentally disabled, poorly behaved, etc.), even when done for the purpose of providing needed assistance, often leads to the unintended consequence of stigma. When combined with the lack of attention to quality control in the implementation of interventions, the practice often results in a failure to alter or improve outcomes.

To avoid this possibility, rather than designing interventions that are exclusively targeted at black or Latino males, in many cases it will be beneficial to focus policies on need rather than race or gender identity. In addition to making discrimination lawsuits less likely and avoiding the charge that other students in need have been ignored (e.g., girls or low-income white students), such an approach will make it less likely that policy interventions will inadvertently contribute to the stigmatization and marginalization of those they were designed to help. For example, youth employment programs like Year Up and college access programs such as POSSE have proven to be effective at supporting young men of color without explicitly targeting them.[5]

6 *Policy interventions should consider both individual and institutional system levels of change.*

A growing body of research has shown that the most successful interventions for supporting young adults focus on both individual and organizational change strategies (Steinberg 1996). The best interventions designed to address social problems like unemployment and under-employment, domestic violence, gang violence, and HIV, focus on both individual behaviors and the need for system change.

For example, programs aimed at reducing the number of students who drop out of school are more likely to succeed if they not only target at-risk students but also address the conditions in school (e.g., shortage of counselors, lack of academic support, etc.) that contribute to high dropout rates. Similarly, a 2014 study of single-sex schools that target young men of color found that the most successful schools obtain better strategies because of their attention to key variables such as improved teaching, advising, parental involvement, and school leadership (Fergus et al. 2014). For this reason, initiatives that target males of color such as My Brothers Keeper (MBK) are likely to have greater impact if they include efforts to address institutional, policy, and system supports rather than simply targeting individuals.

[5] For further information on Year Up and POSSEE, see www.Year-up.org and Possefoundation.org.

7   *Policy interventions must develop systems of social support that extend beyond a single domain in order to create a context for improved individual outcomes.*

Several studies of successful intervention programs have shown that changes in the attitudes and behavior of minority males are most likely to occur if they are carried out within a collective, community-based approach (de Jesus Acosta 2007). Because the challenges facing young men and boys of color typically cannot be reduced to a single domain such as education, health, or youth development, the most effective interventions will focus on developing systems of support that operate across domains (Smithers and Robinson 2006).

For example, while peer study groups and afterschool programs have been shown to be effective in providing support to at-risk youth (Steinberg 1996; James, et al. 2011), they have been shown to be even more effective in reinforcing pro-social behavior and deterring delinquency and other social problems when they work in concert with other support systems (McLaughlin 2001). Research has also shown that a collaborative approach among a variety of service providers is more likely to result in improved social and educational outcomes, and the internalization of a new set of attitudes and behaviors among black and Latino boys (Boykin and Noguera 2011).

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive compilation of the types of policy principles that should be utilized to support the development of interventions. It is important for others to expand upon these recommendations, to modify and critique them, and to offer new ones based upon further experience and ongoing practice and research. While it is important to recognize that more fundamental changes in law, policy, and the structure of economic opportunities are needed to make lasting and far-reaching changes, it is also important to advocate for more limited changes that can incrementally alleviate some of the hardships facing black and Latino men and boys in the near future.

Finally, it would be wise to maintain a healthy degree of skepticism toward any policy or program that is held up as a panacea. The problems confronting black and Latino males have been present for many years, and it is unlikely that they will be alleviated quickly or easily. While decisive action is essential, it is also important not to reflexively embrace interventions that are held up as solutions (e.g., single-sex schools) to complex problems. Such approaches do little to provide guidance for policy, and they are not likely to result in sustained investments once it becomes clear that they cannot withstand close scrutiny. For this reason, it would be wise for public agencies and private foundations to support research and evaluation of promising programs.

Creating support systems for males of color and for schools that serve them so that they are successful at addressing their academic and social needs will not be easy. If it were, the problems facing black and Latino males would not be as severe as they are now. To change course, it will be important for the issues confronting minority males to be addressed as an *American problem*, rather than as a problem that only those who directly experience it should be concerned about. This means drawing on the resources of our entire society in the public and private sectors to respond in a concerted and coordinated manner.

We need a proactive, preventative strategy to improve the life trajectories of African American and Latino males, and education must be at the center of it. Given the current state of American politics, it may be difficult to generate the will at the federal level to embark upon a new direction. Racial bias, xenophobia, and indifference toward the plight of minority males are significant obstacles. However, at the local level, it may be more likely for those who seek to bring about changes in policy to generate support among key constituents—parents, churches, community-based organizations(CBOs), businesses, schools, etc.—to implement policy interventions that genuinely make a difference. Generating the will and the commitment at the local level to support strategies that have a track record of success, aligning those strategies with the principles set forth by RISE, and replicating programs that have demonstrated effectiveness elsewhere, are steps that can be taken that will most likely to result in lasting change.

These policy principles compliment the principles supported by RISE to further educational opportunities for males of color. Both force us to address the challenges confronting males of color by confronting the systemic and structural barriers that place them at a significant disadvantage and often at risk. If applied together in a concerted and strategic manner, genuine progress in altering educational and developmental outcomes for males of color would be more likely. The time for discussing these ideas has passed. It is now a time for creative and thoughtful action.

Endnotes

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RISE for Boys and Men of Color

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