

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

TEACHING AND LEARNING
IN THE ERA OF THE COMMON CORE

A JOBS FOR THE FUTURE PROJECT

LITERACY PRACTICES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS

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THE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER SERIES

By Alfred W. Tatum

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER SERIES

Students at the Center explores the role that student-centered approaches can play to deepen learning and prepare young people to meet the demands and engage the opportunities of the 21st century. *Students at the Center* synthesizes existing research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning. The papers that launch this project renew attention to the importance of engaging each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college and a career. Student-centered approaches to learning, while recognizing that learning is a social activity, pay particular attention to the importance of customizing education to respond to each student's needs and interests, making use of new tools for doing so.

The broad application of student-centered approaches to learning has much in common with other education reform movements including closing the achievement gaps and providing equitable access to a high-quality education, especially for underserved youth. Student-centered approaches also align with emerging work to attain the promise and meet the demands of the Common Core State Standards.

However, critical and distinct elements of student-centered approaches to learning challenge the current schooling and education paradigm:

- > Embracing the student's experience and learning theory as the starting point of education;
- > Harnessing the full range of learning experiences at all times of the day, week, and year;
- > Expanding and reshaping the role of the educator; and
- > Determining progression based upon mastery.

Despite growing interest in student-centered approaches to learning, educators have few places to which they can turn for a comprehensive accounting of the key components of this emerging field. With funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Jobs for the Future asked nine noted research teams to synthesize existing research in order to build the knowledge base for student-centered approaches to learning and make the findings more widely available.

The topic of this paper, as with each in the series, was selected to foster a deeper, more cohesive, research-based understanding of one or more core elements of student-centered approaches to learning. The authors in this series: synthesize and analyze existing research in their areas; identify what is known and where gaps remain related to student-centered approaches to learning; and discuss implications, opportunities, and challenges for education stakeholders who put students at the center. The authors were asked to consider the above definition of student-centered approaches, but were also encouraged to add, subtract, or critique it as they wished.

The authors were not asked explicitly to address the Common Core State Standards. Nevertheless, the research proceeded as discussions of the Common Core were unfolding, and several papers draw connections with that work. The thinking, learning, and teaching required for all students to reach the promised outcomes of the Common Core provide a backdrop for this project. The introductory essay looks across this paper and its companion pieces to lift up the key findings and implications for a new phase in the country's quest to raise achievement levels for all young people.

The nine research papers are loosely organized around three major areas of inquiry—learning theory; applying student-centered approaches; and scaling student-centered learning—although many of the papers necessarily cross more than one area:

1. LEARNING THEORY: What does foundational and emerging research, particularly in the cognitive and behavioral sciences, tell us about how students learn and about what motivates them to learn?

Mind, Brain, and Education

Christina Hinton, Kurt W. Fischer, Catherine Glennon

Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice

Eric Toshalis, Michael J. Nakkula

2. APPLYING STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES: How are student-centered approaches to learning implemented? What is the nature of teaching in student-centered learning environments? How can students who are underrepresented in postsecondary education be engaged earlier and perform well in the math and reading activities that scaffold learning? How are advances in technology customizing curriculum and changing modes of learning to meet the needs of each student?

Teachers at Work—Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice

Barbara Cervone, Kathleen Cushman

Literacy Practices for African-American Male Adolescents

Alfred W. Tatum

Latino/a and Black Students and Mathematics

Rochelle Gutierrez, Sonya E. Irving

Curricular Opportunities in the Digital Age

David H. Rose, Jenna W. Gravel

3. SCALING UP STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES TO LEARNING: How have schools sought to increase personalization and with what outcomes for learning? What is the relationship between assessment and student-centered approaches? What can districts do to support student-centered approaches to learning?

Personalization in Schools

Susan Yonezawa, Larry McClure, Makeba Jones

Assessing Learning

Heidi Andrade, Kristen Huff, Georgia Brooke

Changing School District Practices

Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, Nathalie Carrier

A number of distinguished researchers and practitioners serve as advisors to *Students at the Center* including Scott Evenbeck, founding president of the New Community College, City University of New York; Charles Fadel, Visiting Scholar, Harvard Graduate School of Education, MIT ESG/IAP, and Wharton/Penn CLO; Ronald Ferguson, Senior Lecturer in Education and Public Policy, Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Kennedy School; Louis Gomez, Professor and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Chair in Digital Media and Learning, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, UCLA; Susan Moore Johnson, Professor and the Jerome T. Murphy Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education; Jim Liebman, Simon H. Rifkind Professor of Law, Columbia University School of Law; Miren Uriarte, Professor, College of Public and Community Service, University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Arthur VanderVeen, Vice President, Business Strategy and Development at Compass Learning.

To download the papers, introductory essay, executive summaries, and additional resources, please visit the project website: www.studentsatthecenter.org.

Over the coming months, Jobs for the Future and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation will craft opportunities to engage a broad audience in the conversation sparked by these papers. We look forward to building a shared understanding and language with you for this important undertaking.



Nancy Hoffman, Adria Steinberg, Rebecca Wolfe

Jobs for the Future



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Jobs for the Future identifies, develops, and promotes education and workforce strategies that expand opportunity for youth and adults who are struggling to advance in America today. In more than 200 communities across 43 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

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The **Nellie Mae Education Foundation** is the largest charitable organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. The Foundation supports the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches to learning at the middle and high school levels across New England. To elevate student-centered approaches, the Foundation utilizes a strategy that focuses on: developing and enhancing models of practice; reshaping education policies; increasing the body of evidenced-based knowledge about student-centered approaches and increasing public understanding and demand for high-quality educational experiences. The Foundation's initiative and strategy areas are: District Level Systems Change; State Level Systems Change; Research and Development; and Public Understanding. Since 1998, the Foundation has distributed over \$110 million in grants.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alfred W. Tatum, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He also serves as the director of the UIC Reading Clinic where he hosts an annual African American Adolescent Male Summer Literacy Institute. He authored the award-winning book, *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap* (Stenhouse Publishers 2005). His second book, *Reading for Their Life: Re(Building) the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males*, was published by Heinemann in August 2009.

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INTRODUCTION



All my grades are bad and nobody can help me.”

–African-American male adolescent, Battle Creek, Michigan

“I am a lost soul.”

–African-American male adolescent in the Cook County, Illinois, Juvenile Detention Center

Developing highly literate youth and preparing all students for advanced postsecondary education are urgent issues in the United States. Some suggest that the stability of the nation as the world’s economic power depends on the next generation’s ability to read and write well (Clifton 2011). Others are less concerned about the relationship between literacy and the economy but insist that all young people have the opportunity to experience the positive influence of literacy on their lives. For example, Linda Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell (2009) contend that a “literacy of promise” can bring together teachers and students to question social and economic inequities and work for justice. These two perspectives indicate that the aims of literacy development are not without competing interests for the nearly 50 million students in grades 5 to 12.

Regardless of debates over the aims of literacy instruction, the greatest challenge remains: far too many American adolescents struggle with reading. Thirty-eight percent of twelfth-graders performed at or above a proficient level in reading in 2009 (NCES 2010). A large percentage find passages from the twelfth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) challenging and fail to answer comprehension questions correctly (see box on page 2 for sample passage excerpt and questions).

Although their struggles with reading are not unique, a higher percentage of African-American male adolescents fail to perform at a proficient level when responding to assessment questions on similar passages, according to trend data. Their reading performance, as a group, has scored stubbornly low on the NAEP assessments, despite unprecedented research and experimentation to increase reading achievement throughout the nation. For example, there have been initiatives to close the achievement gap between high-performing and low-performing readers, a growing body of research on adolescent literacy, and more than 45 years of federal policy and mandates on reading instruction (Beers, Probst, & Rief 2007; Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky 2009; Ferguson 2008; Lenski & Lewis 2008; Payne 2010).

During this time, the productive shift to focus on both equity (i.e., equalizing facilities and funding) and excellence (i.e., ensuring high-quality instruction)—rather than equity alone—has not yielded desired reading outcomes. While preparing this paper, I could not identify one urban school district in the United States with 40 percent or more of African-American males reading at a proficient level on the grade 8 or grade 12 NAEP.



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NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS, GRADE 12

Excerpt from a Sample Reading Passage
Days of Oaks, Years of Salt
by Lucienne S. Bloch

My grandmother walked most of the way from a little town near Graz, in Austria, to London. She was twenty, green-limbed and raw, and so was this century: both of them restless, unshackled, upheaved from an ancient order of things into a world whose recent peace was more tentative than convincing.

Of course she did not walk alone; there were, still, vestigial proprieties in operation. Her brother, senior by a couple of significant years, accompanied her: two dark-eyed travelers seeking roomier futures than the ones they stood to inherit at home. Leaving behind three younger sisters and a widowed mother, they strolled toward the possibilities that an uncle, well settled in a woolens business in London, might provide. They carried everything on their backs, food and shoes and such, the goodbyes. At night they slept in fields, in barns when the weather turned. They picked up crumbs of new languages, mouthfuls to get by on. There is no record of this legendary journey apart from the remembered and recounted one; no documentary diaries, no franked passports, no railway or steamship ticket stubs, no hotel bills, no souvenir photographs or trinkets, no many-creased maps. Did it happen, as told? I believe so. I always believed so, although I knew the reports had been altered by the time they reached me, embroidered, translated, aggrandized, I supposed. Even so, I swallowed them whole, lured and hooked like a trout by a glitteringly fabulous fly. The adventure of it! [The passage continues for several pages.]

Sample Questions

1. Explain the narrator's feelings about the grandmother.
2. What was the grandmother seeking in going to London, and did she find it? Support your answer using information from the story.
3. Soon after the grandmother arrived in London, her uncle persuaded her to
 - A) emigrate to the United States
 - B) marry someone he had chosen
 - C) become a professional singer
 - D) work as an artist's model
4. Explain what you think the grandmother was trying to communicate to the narrator by the gift of the photo album.
5. How does the description of the grandmother's apartment contribute to an understanding of her life?

The full sample passage excerpted above and other sample questions and answers are available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/booklets.asp>.

Unfortunately, the last decade has brought several proposals for oversimplified solutions to improve the reading achievement of America's children. In March 2010, when the U.S. Department of Education released *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, it stressed four areas: improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader; providing information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children's school, and to help educators improve their students' learning;

implementing college- and career-ready standards and developing improved assessments aligned with those standards; and improving student learning and achievement in America's lowest-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions.

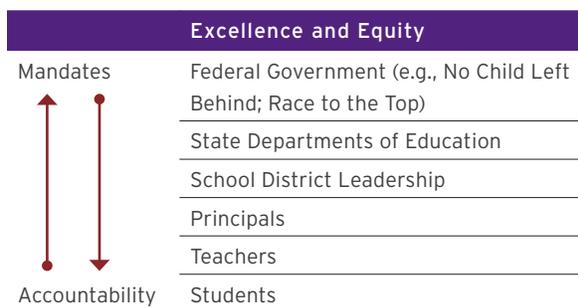
These focal points align with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which invested \$4.35 billion in innovative educational reform efforts in states creating certain conditions believed to produce significant improvement in student outcomes. ARRA's four core education reform areas were: adopting

standards and assessments that prepare students for college and to compete in the global economy; building data systems that measure student growth and success and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction; recruiting, rewarding, and training effective teachers and principals; and turning around the nation’s lowest-achieving schools.

While these priorities are promising, they are too generic for advancing the literacy development of African-American male adolescents. More specific guidance is needed. Most school literacy practices continue to miss the mark and suffer from an underestimation of the depths of student needs. Far too many African-American male adolescents are still failing to earn high school diplomas. Many of them still attend so-called “dropout factories,” large urban high schools that produce 69 percent of all African-American dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education 2006). Federal policies and mandates, while warranted, unintentionally could make it more difficult to provide high-quality literacy instruction to African-American male adolescents.

One problem is the federal government’s use of cascading sanctions for schools and school districts that do not improve student achievement. Many urban school districts have adopted a literacy-sanction hierarchy that has yet to yield successful reading outcomes at scale among African-American male adolescents (see *Figure 1*).

**FIGURE 1
LITERACY-SANCTION HIERARCHY**



For example, teachers in an urban school district can be in full compliance with school-level mandates, principals can be in full compliance with district mandates, districts can be in full compliance with state mandates, and the state can be in full

compliance with federal mandates—and yet we see only small upticks in student reading achievement. These minor gains, usually associated with more (though not necessarily better) reading instruction, will fall short of preparing all students for college and careers. The scope of the problem is clear, considering that barely 30 percent of high school freshmen read at grade level (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue 2007).

Providing effective literacy instruction to male adolescents has become increasingly complex in our four-tiered accountability system (federal, state, district, and school levels). In fact, the use of accountability assessments in secondary schools increases the incentives for schools to push out failing or marginal students before graduation (Losen 2004).

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center Series*¹

For more information on assessment at different system levels, see *Assessing Learning*, by Heidi Andrade, Kristen Huff, and Georgia Brooke.



Researchers who bring attention to multilayered systems of accountability have shown how school-district leadership engages in “checklisting”—that is, auditing to determine if certain practices are in place—as a tool of accountability (Kincheloe & Hess 2005; Reville 2007). A closer look reveals how this practice fails to lead to higher reading achievement in urban high schools (see *Figure 2*).

**FIGURE 2
SCHOOL-DISTRICT LEADERSHIP
“CHECKLISTING”**

Monitor achievement gap between various student groups	✓
Establish school-based expectations and targets for improvement	✓
Identify proven programs and practices to help struggling readers	No evidence of this for African-American male adolescents attending urban high schools
Set priorities to guide the allocation of resources	✓
Monitor efforts to raise student achievement to ensure ineffective interventions are adjusted or eliminated	✓

It has been relatively easy to monitor the achievement gap, establish school-based expectations, set priorities to guide the allocation of resources, and monitor efforts to raise student achievement to eliminate ineffective practices. However, it has proven much more difficult to identify strategies to help struggling readers at the high school level. There is virtually no empirical evidence of proven practices and programs that significantly improve the reading achievement of a high percentage of African-American male adolescents who enter urban high schools as struggling readers. Guidance for advancing their literacy development has been extrapolated from reading research on elementary-aged children, where the research literature is more robust.

The reading instruction offered to African-American male adolescents is often based on assessment scores framed within the context of data-driven instruction. African-American males also often are placed in remedial reading classrooms or regular English tracks based on reading scores, and they often receive less demanding or poorly conceptualized reading instruction. This occurs without regard for other considerations that may have affected their achievement (e.g., poor instruction; inadequate assessment practices). In remedial classes, they are asked to read less than peers in regular classes and suffer from underexposure to quality texts (Tatum 2009). These different academic pathways for many African-American males often cement low-levels of literacy and reify social inequality (Neuman 2008).

Reading difficulties combine with out-of-school forces to place particularly those from urban low-income neighborhoods, at risk for academic failure and maladaptive behaviors (Hall, Cassidy, & Stevenson 2008; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer 2003). Many will be forever locked out of the mainstream workforce. The voices of the young men who commented, "All my grades are bad and nobody can help me," and "I am a lost soul," suggest that literacy instruction must be broader than just developing skills

to perform well on reading assessments. Because reading comprehension forms the foundation for learning just about anything after fourth grade and for functioning in society, educators need to pay more attention to how literacy instruction can safeguard academic and personal well-being.

In 2003, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges concluded that writing needs to be at the forefront of current efforts to improve schools. Nevertheless, writing instruction remains neglected because it lacks an explicit focus on improving the reading achievement of African-American male adolescents. This is problematic for several reasons. First, approximately 70 percent of students in grades 4 through 12 can be characterized as low-performing writers (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue 2007). Second, as the National Center on Education and the Economy (2007) has noted, "This is a world in which a very high level of preparation of reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce." Third, many adolescents have yet to discover the power of writing in their own lives.

Notwithstanding the challenges of delivering effective reading instruction, decades of reforms and federal mandates have set the stage for promising literacy practices in America's high schools. It is clear that the research literature on reading and adolescent literacy is insufficiently robust for addressing the needs of African-American males without considering the broader contexts in which their literacy development is situated. The literacy development of these young men sits at the intersections of educational policy, reading research, urban school reform and all it entails, and a wide array of social, economic, and political forces. In the long tradition of African-American educators, this paper seeks to help us think pragmatically and strategically about pathways to reverse some of the longstanding trends of reading



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underperformance among African-American male adolescents—and to provide insight into factors that lead many African-American male adolescents to excel in reading.

While other authors in this series focus on cognitive, psychological, and biological alignments with student-centered learning, I offer an additive socio-historical perspective, one that complements the other alignments but is often ignored in large-scale literacy reform efforts. This perspective is useful because of the persistence of many problems that African-American males experience. Moreover, there should be, at minimum, a tripartite aim for the literacy development of African-American male adolescents: personal development, economic vitality, and global participation. The presence of U.S.-born African-American male leadership and participation in the national and global marketplace and politics is negligible.

BRIDGING DISPARATE RESEARCH LITERATURES

Within the past decade, educational psychologists, sociologists, social workers, counselors, multiculturalists, educational theorists, curriculum theorists, and counseling educators have contributed to a large body of research on African-American male adolescents (Banks 2008; Kincheloe & Harris 2007; Murrell 2007; Pitre et al. 2009; Tillman 2009; Zamani-Gallaher & Polite 2010). Several recurring themes appear, namely in-school correlates (e.g., rigor of school curricula; teacher quality) and out-of-school correlates (e.g., parent participation; student mobility) that contribute to the academic performance of these young men. Among the most prominent are issues of self-concept, self-efficacy, and identity development; overrepresentation in particular special education categories; counseling contexts; sociopolitical and historical contexts of African-American education; school violence and academically unacceptable schools; explanations of the racial achievement gap; and urban educational reform. Each is situated within a dichotomous frame of potential and possibilities or of dilemmas and challenges. The topics address the impact of broader sociological and economic forces. To a lesser degree, the literature also discusses collegiate participation of African-American males and their experiences in gifted education (Milner 2002; Obiakor 1999; Zamani-Gallaher et al. 2010).

While there is a wide body of literature on African-American education in general, and on African-American males in particular, the research pays scant attention to their reading and writing development. At the same time, reading research has grown significantly over the past four decades, but little attention has gone to how reading develops in African-American male adolescents.

The root causes of this neglect are unclear, but the consequences are not: It contributes to policy, curricular, and pedagogical misalignments that

amount to ineffective education. Three types of factors that may affect the reading achievement of African-American male adolescents recur in the research literature: instructional; sociocultural; and personal.

INSTRUCTIONAL FACTORS

In 2000, the National Reading Panel provided an evidenced-based assessment of the scientific literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. The panel covered the experimental and quasi-experimental research literature relevant to a set of topics judged to be of central importance in teaching children to read. It conducted a statistical meta-analysis, including calculations of effect sizes of research published in English in refereed journals, focusing on children's reading development from preschool to grade 12. The findings related to adolescents were that:

- > Providing fluency instruction (e.g., repeated oral reading procedures that included guidance from teachers, peers, or parents) has a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension across a range of grade levels.
- > Providing vocabulary instruction leads to gains in comprehension, but it is critical for methods to be appropriate to the reader's age and ability.
- > Providing explicit instruction in the application of comprehension strategies is highly effective in enhancing understanding.

A more recent review of the research identified the essential elements of fostering and teaching reading comprehension (Duke et al. 2011). These included building disciplinary knowledge, providing exposure to a volume and range of texts, providing motivating texts and contexts for reading, teaching strategies for

comprehending, teaching text structures, engaging students in discussion, building vocabulary and language knowledge, integrating reading and writing, observing and assessing students, and differentiating instruction.

The research is clear that the volume of experiences students have while interacting with texts significantly correlates with their overall reading success. It is also clear that motivation highly correlates with reading comprehension, and that texts that capitalize on students' interests contribute to motivation. In addition, discipline and world knowledge heighten reading comprehension, and effective teachers of reading comprehension employ classroom discussions to help students make meaning of the texts they encounter (see Duke et al. 2011).

The strong research base for teaching reading has not yielded clear benefits for African-American male youth as they progress through school. This could relate to teacher qualifications or to their expectations and perceptions of African-American male youth (Croninger et al. 2003; Darling-Hammond 2001). Negative teacher expectations have been shown to affect literacy development (Oates 2003). Indeed, one-fourth of the variance of student achievement is associated with characteristics of teachers and schools (Croninger et al. 2003; Marzano 2000; Miller 2003). Student characteristics (e.g., home environment, background knowledge, motivation) account for approximately 75 percent of the variance.

At first glance at these statistics, it may seem safe to assume that African-American male youth are primarily culpable for their academic success or failure. However, a closer examination shows that culpability is shared among homes, schools, teachers, and students. Schools and teachers control two

important variables, instruction and curriculum. Robert J. Marzano (2003) offered:

A student scoring at the 50th percentile who spends two years in an average school with an average teacher is likely to continue scoring at the 50th achievement percentile. That same student, having spent two years in a "most effective" school with a "most effective" teacher rockets to the 96th achievement percentile. The converse holds true: If this same student spends two years in a "least effective" school with a "least effective" teacher, that student's achievement level plunges to the third percentile.

SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS

While some researchers have focused on instructional practices inside schools, others have examined the impact of broader sociocultural factors on reading achievement. There is evidence that many variables—culture, social class, home literacy and language experiences, family background advantages, environmental factors—work together to interrupt reading achievement (Lareau 2003; Neuman 2008; Noguera 2003; Snow et al. 2007). The sociocultural argument suggests that literacy is more of a product of a student's home environment and access to economic, human, and community resources. These, in turn, affect students' academic resources. Socioeconomic status, the literacy environment in the home, and reading achievement repeatedly have been shown to be intercorrelated (Noble, Farah, & McCandliss 2006). For example, far too many African-American male youth come from homes in which a language differential places them on an unequal academic playing field with their



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white peers. Language differentials between those with ongoing rich language experiences and those without—including the frequency of engaged reading experiences and vocabulary knowledge—contribute to an early academic decline for African-American male youth that continues throughout high school (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer 2003).

Other moderating influences on the reading achievement of African-American male youth include cultural attitudes, academic climate, the racial demographics of schools, and the relationship between neighborhood quality and schooling (Ceballo, McLoyd, & Toyokawa 2004; Davis 2003; Irving & Hudley 2005; Mickelson & Greene 2006). They also include how social processes of race, class, and gender are interwoven in literacy (Greene & Abt-Perkins 2003; Lesko 2000; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer 2003). Further, researchers have highlighted family and community influences on parental expectations, parental ability to influence what happens in schools, and students' attitudes toward achievement in school (Bourdieu & Pearson 1977; Lenski, Mack, & Brown 2008; McNeal 1999; Sheldon & Epstein 2005). Each has concluded that students in urban schools often have unique needs, influenced by a wide range of factors.

PERSONAL FACTORS

Research shows that certain individual experiences correlate with reading achievement. For example, three gifted African-American adolescents attributed their academic success to confidence in their cognitive abilities, devotion to academia, attitude toward the importance of school, viewing school as a place to gain knowledge rather than grades, and a sense of individuality and nonconformity. These



Three gifted African-American adolescents attributed their academic success to confidence in their cognitive abilities, devotion to academia, attitude toward the importance of school, viewing school as a place to gain knowledge rather than grades, and a sense of individuality and nonconformity. These youth also held positive attitudes about school and connected its significance to their long-term goals.

youth also held positive attitudes about school and connected its significance to their long-term goals. These positive attitudes contributed to their proper planning, hard work, and desire to challenge themselves. They each demonstrated a strong connection to their ethnicity, adopted positive yet assertive attitudes toward school, and held strong beliefs that education was the best way to overcome adversity (Graham & Anderson 2008).

John Guthrie and Angela McRae (2011) found that behavioral engagement, which consists of effort, time, and persistence in reading, is a significant predictor of reading achievement for African-American students. In fact, behavioral engagement outdistanced all demographic variables (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status) and cognitive aptitude in spoken and reading vocabulary in generating academic performance

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center Series*²

For more information on engagement, see *Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice*, by Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula.



for African-American adolescents. Other research has found that school grades in language arts and vocabulary test scores are uniquely predicted by two qualities of behavioral engagement: school participation and expectations that students will continue their education beyond high school.

Ciara Smalls and her colleagues (2007) found that embracing an ethnic group identity may enhance school engagement for African-American males, which in turn will increase achievement. This represents a shift in the research literature: It contradicts the notion of oppositional identity and rejects the idea that African-American students do not want to be viewed as smart to avoid “acting white” (Bergin & Cooks 2002; Grantham 2006;

Ogbu 2003; Sanders 1998). Researchers also have investigated the relationship between masculinity and schooling, finding that ignoring students' masculine identities can have an adverse effect on their reading achievement and engagement with literacy activities (Maynard 2002; Moss 2007; Smith & Wilhelm 2009; Young 2000).

THE MULTIFACTOR IMPACT

Although this brief overview treats instructional, sociocultural, and personal factors as independent of one another, it is their overlap that determines pathways of success or failure for African-American male adolescents. Catherine Snow and her colleagues (2007) found that multiple factors in adolescents' lives can derail a successful academic trajectory. They argued that students might become disengaged in school for many reasons, including:

- > School tasks become more challenging and less connected to students' lives at precisely the point when young people develop a wide array of nonacademic interests and have the autonomy to decide how to spend their time.
- > Students might become bored in classrooms where low expectations and traditional teaching methods are the rule.
- > The constraints of testing and curricular requirements might decrease students' interest in their school-related reading as they progress through school.

These reasons for disengagement suggest that African-American male adolescents may benefit from teachers with particular qualities and abilities. These include the confidence and competence to advance their students' literacy achievement, the ability to clearly articulate agendas for their literacy development, and the insight to avoid irresponsible curricular orientations that fail to nurture students intellectually or help students appropriate the significance of texts.

STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING AT THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND GENDER

Student-centered approaches to learning have great potential to advance the literacy of African-American male adolescents. By paying attention to the particular needs of this group and nurturing internal and external protective factors, teachers and other adults can help build resiliency and other critical resources that African-American male adolescents must have in order to succeed academically. This is especially important for young males who encounter the risk-contributing variables inside and outside of schools as reflected in the literature review (Swanson et al. 2003).

Figure 3 illustrates how student-centered approaches to learning relate to effective literacy practices for young African-American males, with career and college readiness as the goal. It is important to recognize that in a student-centered approach several external resources (e.g., quality teaching, quality texts) affect students' internal resources (e.g., self-esteem, self-concept). Both internal and external resources can be impacted by a student's home life, culture, environment, and economics, which ultimately can affect school- and society-based outcomes.

For many adolescents, having underdeveloped literacy skills is stressful. They struggle to keep up as they progress through high school and academic demands increase. These students need to access both internal and external resources to help them engage with cognitively challenging reading materials. Educators



series

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center Series*³

For more information on how teachers can help improve student success, see *Teachers at Work—Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice*, by Barbara Cervone and Kathleen Cushman.

FIGURE 3
EFFECTIVE LEARNING PRACTICES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS



play an instrumental role in helping these adolescents identify, build, and utilize their resources for developing successful reading skills and strategies.

Researchers have identified internal factors (e.g., academic skills, a sense of self-concept) and environmental factors (e.g., community supports) as two sources of these protective resources (Cowen & Work 1988; Masten 2001; Werner & Smith 1992). Researchers have observed a meaningful purpose and goals among resilient youth. These individual characteristics are key personal attributes for high school students, including struggling readers.

External factors that promote resilience include a wide range of influences over which adolescents do not have direct control (e.g., teaching, curriculum, instructional contexts, and classroom contexts). These factors affect adolescents' responses to stressful events (Small & Memmo 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina 2000). A student's immediate environment in school can provide many protective factors that can help address reading difficulties. A consistently caring adult, positive expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation are factors that have proven to be effective for nurturing resilience. Adolescents are more likely to be resilient if they feel secure in the presence of adults who clearly communicate high expectations with realistic goals, and who support students' meaningful participation by engaging them with authentic tasks and real-world dialogue (Henderson & Milstein 2003; Stanton-Salazar & Spina 2000). For individual students, certain protective resources will be in greater demand depending on both the student's and contextual factors, such as the accumulation of failure. Teachers should acknowledge each of these attributes and combine them with other resources to help improve reading achievement and shape positive literacy and personal trajectories.

The schematic in Figure 3 is anchored in the premise that quality teaching and quality texts are critical for (re)orienting African-American male adolescents toward improving their reading achievement and using literacy as a tool of human development. Three things are important for providing these:

- > A clear concept of the roles of literacy instruction is vital for advancing students' literacy development.
- > A sincere interest to contribute to the personal development and growth of the African-American male student that will allow him to live well.
- > Knowledge of a wide range of texts across disciplines is important for selecting texts for careful reading to prepare African-American males for engaged citizenship at local, national, and international levels.

AN HISTORICAL LOOK AT THE LITERACY TRADITIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES

Understanding the roles that reading and writing played for African-American males historically serves as a productive starting point for conceptualizing quality teaching practices, selecting texts, and structuring instructional contexts.

Many of the current proposed strategies for increasing the reading achievement of African-American males are ahistorical: that is, they do not consider the pathways of literacy taken by African-American males historically. As Valerie Gue and I note in a forthcoming *Urban Education* article, "Understanding the historical narrative is important for taking a critical view of literacy practices, educational policy and mandates, and structural changes in schools that are characteristically urban and their potential for safeguarding the academic and personal well-being of African-American male youth" (Tatum & Gue forthcoming).

Researchers also have noted a lack of information on why African-American males practice literacy (Kirkland & Jackson 2009). A socio-historical perspective provides insight into the wide range of reasons that African-American males of the past practiced literacy. In discussing the 19th-century educational movement of the urban North, Adah Randolph (2009) identified at least eight reasons:

- > Improve their social and economic status;
- > Strive for racial uplift;
- > Understand contemporary issues facing African Americans;
- > Advance the economic, social, and political aims of the community;

- > Improve their life chances;
- > Secure their full membership rights;
- > Tear down the walls of discrimination; and
- > Advance human liberty.

Other historical accounts indicate that literacy development among African-American males focused on the development of their identity (Belt-Beyan 2004) and the establishment of “useful” libraries—useful because readers can appropriate significance from texts that address their overlapping identities (Holloway 2006). Literacy also was embraced as a pipeline for personal engagement and transformation as African-American males struggled for political, economic, and cultural equality and citizenship. This was evident as African-American males formed literary societies in several Northern cities in the early 1800s. These men, some in their teenage years, came together to study texts to improve their reading and writing skills. More important, they came together to cultivate a scholarly way of life (Belt-Beyan 2004). What African-American males were reading and writing and the local, national, and international contexts that shaped these practices were the most important signatures of their literacy development. For more than two centuries, they turned to texts to make sense of their present conditions in the United States and to shape possibilities for their futures. Historical accounts of the lives of African-American men are laden with references to “enabling texts”—those that move beyond a sole cognitive focus (e.g., skill and strategy development) to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus (Tatum 2009).

With today’s emphasis on standards, rigor, and assessments as a way to improve reading achievement, advancing the literacy development of African-American males is viewed as an in-school phenomenon related to standardized test scores. This

current iteration of the role of literacy is a radical departure from the historical conceptualizations of literacy development. It is one reason that many African-American male adolescents who struggle with reading do not experience classroom literacy instruction that goes beyond developing their skills as readers. Most federal, state, district, and school efforts lack a focus on helping these young males strengthen their identities and embrace reading as a cultural practice in meaningful contexts. Although many teachers are effective in teaching reading to African-American male adolescents in urban high schools, literacy reform efforts for a large percentage of this population are ahistorical and apolitical, often ignoring or suppressing these young males’ need for intellectual development.

Using a socio-historical perspective sheds light on the short-sighted vision of some administrators and teachers who inquire about effective curricula and instructional practices for African-American male students. For example, I have been asked the following questions:

- > Does it matter what African-American males are reading as long as they are reading?
- > What are your views on high-interest, low-readability texts for African-American males?
- > Should I correct the spelling or language of African-American males when they are writing or speaking?

The thinking behind such questions illustrates low expectations for these students. It also runs counter to the roles of literacy and the conduct of schools historically. Reading, writing, and speaking eloquently were viewed as pillars of protection for African-American males. Literacy instruction was deeply principled and planned to help them gain and maintain authority over themselves (McHenry 2002).



A consistently caring adult, positive expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation are factors that have proven to be effective for nurturing resilience. Adolescents are more likely to be resilient if they feel secure in the presence of adults who clearly communicate high expectations with realistic goals.

The goals of reading were much more than reading for reading's sake, as the questions suggest. In addition, allowing students to speak or spell poorly as some type of cultural salve would have been viewed as reprehensible—a caving in to a racist perception of the uneducable, inferior African-American male. Although resources were limited, teachers were determined to find the best texts among them to engage their students, not those that were most readable. Writing and speaking were deeply purposeful. Autobiographical accounts by African-American males are full of stories in which they attribute their literacy development to demanding and bright educators who impressed them and influenced them greatly. See, for example, the autobiographies of the preeminent historian John Hope Franklin (2005) and Benjamin Mays (1971), a president of Morehouse College for many years.

Recounting his high school days in the 1920s in *Mirror to America* (2005), Franklin wrote:

What Booker T. Washington High School could rightly boast was a first-rate faculty dedicated to teaching and perhaps more importantly, the development of students' self-confidence. . . . Our three English teachers . . . made us stretch our minds. They not only assumed that every one of us would go to college, but major in English as well. . . . I know no member of the faculty who did not subscribe to the general principles and conduct laid down by Principal Woods. Indeed, the faculty was as zealous as he was in urging students to cultivate self-confidence in the face of racist practices and policies that would deny them dignity and even their humanity.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITING

Historical accounts also shed light on the types, characteristics, and roles of writing embraced by African-American males as they sought to protect their dignity in a racist society. An analysis of historical writings suggests that:

- > The politics of race, class, and sex were interlocking features in the works of African-American writers, and they often trapped themselves in the white/black binary (Hogue 2003; Mullane 1993; Wall 2005).
- > Themes of literacy and liberation were consistent across texts, which often depicted teaching and learning literacy as communal acts that valued reciprocity among the stories of black people (Perry 2003).
- > Without compunction, African-American writers focused on the social, political, and economic concerns of African-American communities (Fisher 2009).

African-American males wrote to provide perspectives on the current events and historical orientations that informed their lives. They penned both narrative and expository texts to fight for fair treatment and equal pay, restore an accurate historical record to counter the inferiority of society's dominant narratives, and discuss the liberating potential of education. They wrote poems, speeches, essays, pamphlets, short stories, and full-length novels to reimagine their experiences in the United States (Mullane 1993).

Writings by African-American males in the United States point toward at least four salient characteristics: defining self; becoming resilient;



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engaging others; and building capacity. These characteristics appear repeatedly in the work of many who used both creative fiction and exposition to frame their writings (Tatum 2009).

African-American male adolescents have been severed from the long-storied tradition of African-American male writers. One way to reconnect today's young African-Americans with the historical roots of African-American writing and reading traditions is to focus on multiple vital signs of literacy development (Tatum 2008).

VITAL SIGNS OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS

Reading-trend data on African-American male adolescents, the influence of internal and external factors on their reading achievement, and an historical understanding of the roles of literacy in the lives of African-American males: these all suggest a need to give attention to multiple vital signs of literacy in order to improve the reading and writing achievement of African-American male adolescents and address their out-of-school needs (see *Table 1, "Vital Signs of Literacy Instruction," on page 16*). Although there is support in the research literature for each of the vital signs (Kamil et al. 2010; Samuels & Farstrup 2011), more empirical data are needed to examine the impact that the intersection of these vital signs has on the reading achievement of African-American male adolescents.

The four types of vital signs are:

- > **Vital signs of reading:** These are designed to improve reading and writing skills and nurture language development. The National Assessment of Educational Progress is used to measure skills associated with the vital signs of reading. They are necessary for providing the working tools students need to handle text independently and constitute a necessary minimum for all literacy efforts. The working tools include decoding, self-questioning, using language, monitoring comprehension, and summarizing. The other vital signs also affect reading outcomes.
- > **Vital signs of readers and educators:** These pay attention to students' lived experiences, both in school and outside of school, and are useful for considering ways to improve the human condition.
- > **Vital signs of reading and writing instruction:** These are useful for conceptualizing the rationale for literacy teaching. They are intimately related to rescuing and refining the significance of literacy

instruction and helping us conceptualize the rationale for providing it. Educators must focus on quality support, appropriate texts, assessments, and the potential uses of technology in order to maximize opportunities to shape rigorous adolescent literacy.

- > **Vital signs of educators' approaches:** Teachers need a strong foundational background for teaching geared to the vital signs of reading. The vital signs of educators focus on a sense of shared culpability and advocacy for these young males. Educational contexts must be characterized by competence, commitment, caring, and culpability. Adolescents benefit when they know they belong in the learning community and feel that they are in the presence of an adult advocate who is not going to give up on them.

Increasingly, courageous stances are required to counter stifling literacy mandates and the imposition of reading and writing practices that continually yield similar poor reading outcomes across multiple years. These mandates have narrowed the focus to the vital signs of reading with little regard for examining the other vital signs, and in particular the roles of texts in reading instruction (see *Figure 4 on page 16*). Although research supports each of the vital signs (Kamil et al. 2010; Samuels & Farstrup 2011), more empirical data are needed to examine the impact of the intersection of the vital signs on the reading achievement of African-American male adolescents.

Figure 4 suggests that many recent curricular decisions have centered on supporting students to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress by using an approach to embed more skill and strategy instruction (i.e., vital signs of reading) within existing "honored" curricula (i.e., time-honored canonical texts and content-area textbooks). Again, little attention has

been given to the identities or needs of African-American male adolescents. Education publishers, in turn, have designed curricular materials anchored by the vital signs of reading to align reading materials and instructional practices to state standards. In

contrast, Figure 5 represents a proposed framing for instruction and curricula that pays attention to the four vital signs.

TABLE 1
VITAL SIGNS OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION

	READING	READERS & EDUCATORS	READING & WRITING INSTRUCTION	EDUCATORS' APPROACHES
OBJECTIVES	Providing the working tools (What)	Improving the human condition (Why)	Rescuing the significance of teaching (How)	Interacting with students, not scorecards of achievement (Who)
VITAL SIGNS	Knowledge Fluency Strategy knowledge Writing Language	Home life Culture Environment Language Economics	Quality instructional support Text Context Assessment	Competence Commitment Caring Culpability Courage
GAPS ADDRESSED	Reading achievement gap	Relationship gap	Rigor gap	Responsiveness gap

FIGURE 4
CURRENT FRAMING OF INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULA

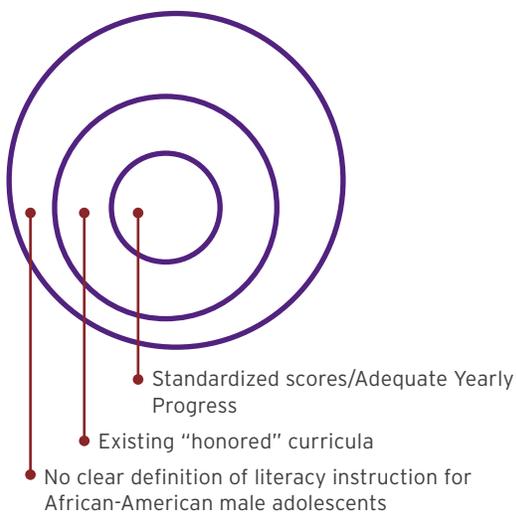
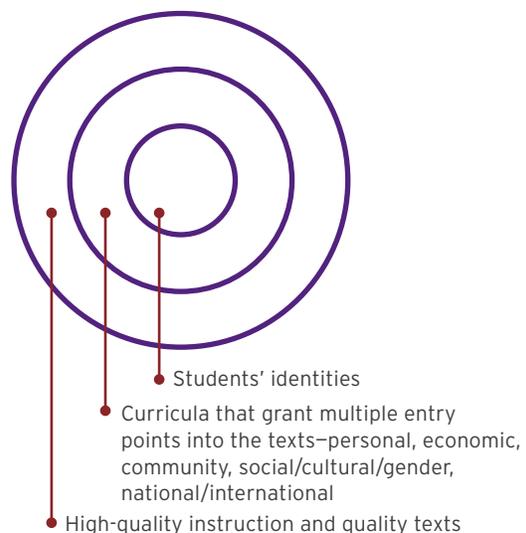


FIGURE 5
PROPOSED FRAMING INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULA



Unlike the diagram in Figure 4, the students' identities in Figure 5 are the anchoring point for literacy instruction, mediating text, and high-quality instruction. This diagram is more aligned with historical orientations of literacy development among African-American males, suggesting the need for a model for (re)envisioning pathways for advancing their literacy development.



The students' identities are the anchoring point for literacy instruction, mediating text, and high-quality instruction. This diagram is more aligned with historical orientations of literacy development among African-American males, suggesting the need for a model for (re)envisioning pathways for advancing their literacy development.

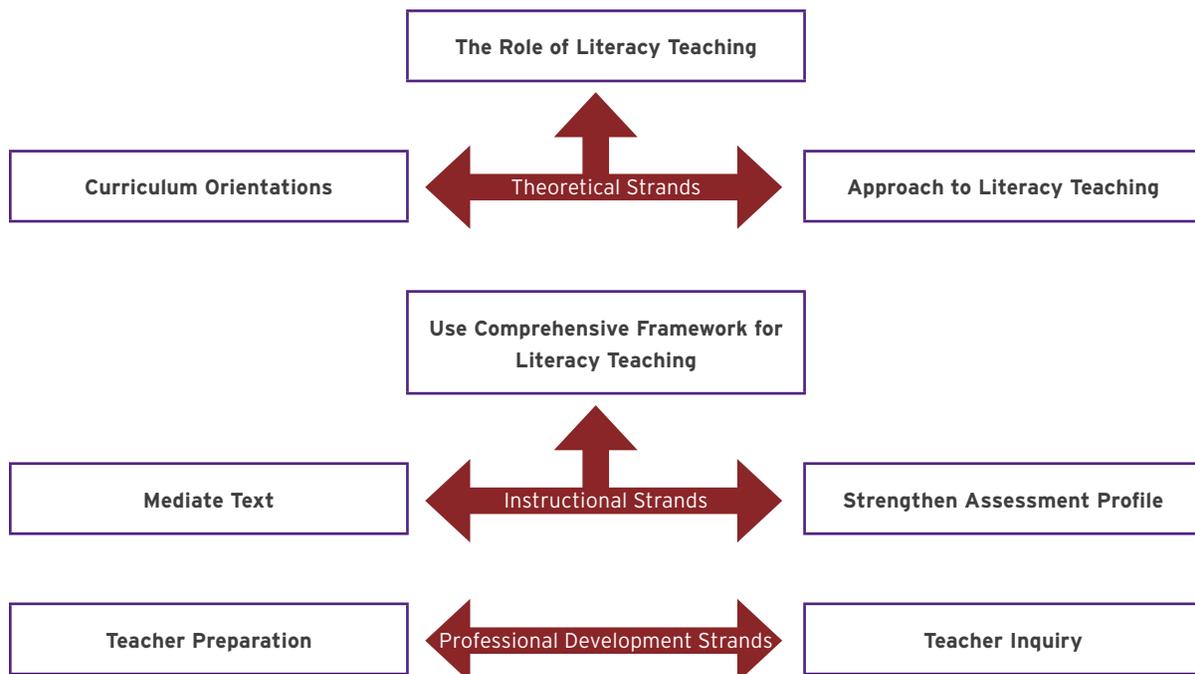
TOWARD A BROADER MODEL OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS

have offered an alternative framework of literacy instruction, one that emerges from the intersections of several bodies of literature. It is designed to help practitioners provide literacy instruction to increase the number of African-American male high school graduates who are prepared for advanced postsecondary academic studies. Based on the state of affairs of reading achievement of African-American male adolescents, it broadens the model of literacy instruction to include a focus on theoretical, instructional, and professional preparation strands (Tatum 2005, 2008) (see Figure 6).

Providing quality instruction and mediating texts to support students' reading, writing, and human development is central to this model. Quality instruction and effective mediation of texts have implications for the three strands. The theoretical strands should be considered when planning how best to provide literacy instruction to African-American male adolescents.

The theoretical strands encompass one's conceptualization of the role of literacy instruction, one's approach to literacy teaching, and curriculum orientations. Here is where improving the life circumstances of African-American males must be

FIGURE 6
A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR LITERACY TEACHING



SOURCE: Tatum (2005, 2008)

conceptualized. This could include a focus on both career and college readiness, with a long-term aim of increasing their earnings, as well as a focus on reading and writing to become good men and to restore students' confidence in reading and writing as tools of human development. However, more immediate issues may need to be conceptualized, particularly for young males who have lost confidence in reading and writing as tools of human development and for those who do not have strong adult support outside of school. Many African-American male adolescents rely on schools as their main pathway for development.

The instructional strands have to do with skill and strategy development, the types of texts to use, and ways to evaluate students' literacy behaviors. They focus on knowledge of effective reading and writing research practices, mediating text, and developing a useful comprehensive assessment profile.

The professional development strands encompass teacher preparation and professional development. Teachers knowledgeable about the theoretical and instructional strands may require support to lead African-American male adolescents to high achievement. This model suggests the need to find the synergy between quality instruction and quality texts so that African-American male adolescents do not suffer from an underexposure to either critical element in classrooms.

This model is critical for addressing the reading achievement gap that exists between high- and low-performing readers, the relationship gap between teachers and students of different ethnic groups, the rigor gap between those students who receive rigorous instruction and those who do not, and the responsiveness gap that often leads to a shift of culpability between homes and schools. These gaps align with the four vital signs of literacy instruction.

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center Series*⁴

For more information on closing various gaps in education, see *Personalization in Schools*, by Susan Yonezawa, Larry McClure, and Makeba Jones.



series

THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF MALES AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Are the concepts of student-centered learning important for advancing the literacy development of African-American male adolescents?

The socio-historical approach of this paper suggests that student-centered learning is conceptually sound for advancing the literacy development of African-American male adolescents. Historical orientations also suggest that student-centered learning may need to be expanded to a people-centered learning that honors the local, national, and international contexts and the implications of these contexts for providing African-American males with greater exposure to texts than what they currently read in classrooms. Historically, a student-centered learning/people-centered learning approach is characteristically aimed at larger goals—personal development, racial uplift, economic power, political enfranchisement. Examining the position of African-American males on the academic and social hierarchy in the United States, these needs still exist. Additionally, mastering a set of common skills and learning to read and write with propriety were main staples of the literacy development of African-American males and the aims of effective teachers who held high expectations and impressed their students.

Each of these aligns neatly with the concepts of student-centered learning. However, it is premature to suggest either a causal relationship between student-centered learning and improved reading and writing

outcomes or a shift toward egalitarian relations among the races. At this point, student-centered learning is a suggested pathway for advancing the literacy development of African-American male adolescents, but it is crucial for the new strategies to be well thought out to avoid becoming just another failed experiment. The current political landscape affecting schools, policies, and curricula can lead to a symbolic, piecemeal approach to student-centered strategies rather than a substantive change in the ways literacy instruction for these young males is conceptualized and enacted in racially segregated classrooms and racially diverse classrooms.

Student-centered learning approaches have to be essentially race-based and gender-based for African-American male adolescents, and placed in the broader local, national, and international contexts for African-American males. This will not occur without strong resistance from those who believe that all students are the same and that there is no need to honor students' differences. In addition, many high school teachers will be limited in their capacity to implement student-centered approaches because of their lack of teacher preparation in honoring students' identities while providing quality literacy instruction and selecting and mediating texts.

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center Series*⁵

For more on limitations in implementing student-centered approaches, see *Changing School District Practices*, by Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, and Nathalie Carrier.



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IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Conducting research in traditional school settings has become increasingly difficult in this era of accountability. Often districts mandate both general instructional policies and specific reading curricula, making it more difficult to introduce new approaches. Moreover, the bureaucratic nature of urban high schools often interferes with the growth of empirical research. Leaders of large urban school districts have become distrustful of researchers who collect data and prepare studies but leave students' literacies underdeveloped. This may suggest the need for a more ethical approach for conducting research in large urban school district, an approach that provides direct benefits to students as evidenced by improved reading and writing scores. The need for such research is urgent for African-American male adolescents.

The first challenge is determining how to grow the research with a small number of researchers who study the reading development of African-American male adolescents. As classrooms become more diverse, funding for large-scale or multiyear studies is rarely allocated to examine solely the literacy development of African-American male adolescents unless they are part of another subgroup (e.g., students in a residential facility, juvenile criminal offenders, special education students, gifted youth). As a result, there are more small-scale qualitative studies on the literacy development of African-American male adolescents in out-of-school contexts or alternative settings that do not penetrate the

most important policy debates. More funding must be allocated to support research or create research structures (e.g., the Center for the Reading Achievement of African-American Adolescent Males that I am developing at the University of Illinois at Chicago) if there is a desire to reverse the long-term literacy trends of African-American male adolescents and increase their enrollment in college and participation in the workforce.

In addition, moving toward research-based reading and writing solutions for African-American adolescent males will require more translational research studies with these youth. The models offered in this paper integrate research from several bodies of literature. However, the impact of the intersecting literatures on reading and writing achievement warrants further study. For example, several questions can be investigated:

- > What are effective ways to mediate a wide range of texts with African-American male adolescents in urban high schools to improve their reading achievement and nurture their multiple identities and resilience?
- > What are appropriate conceptualizations of reading instruction for African-American male adolescents in urban high schools and how do these conceptualizations affect reading achievement?



More funding must be allocated to support research or create research structures if there is a desire to reverse the long-term literacy trends of African-American male adolescents and increase their enrollment in college and participation in the workforce.

- > How do we safeguard the literacy rights of high-performing and low-performing African-American male adolescent readers in urban high schools?
- > What aspects of literacy instruction strengthen students' internal resources?
- > How do we effectively prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to advance the reading and writing achievement of African-American male adolescents in large urban school districts?
- > What are effective ways to target instructional programming and afterschool initiatives to address the specific literacy and social needs of African-American male adolescents?
- > How do student-centered approaches to learning affect the reading and writing development of African-American male adolescents?

Researching these questions will yield empirical data that have the potential to penetrate policy debates, change classroom practice, and offer guidance for literacy reform efforts. The result will be schools that better prepare the African-American male adolescent to deal with socially complex problems, reposition himself in the national and global economy, grow into his full stature as a man, and offer his offspring a higher rung in America's economic, political, and social hierarchy.

ENDNOTES

¹ See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/assessing-learning>

² See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice>

³ See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/teachers-work>

⁴ See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/personalization-schools>

⁵ See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/changing-school-district-practices>

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650A, Washington, DC 20001

WWW.JFF.ORG



TEL 781.348.4200 FAX 781.348.4299

1250 Hancock Street, Suite 205N, Quincy, MA 02169
WWW.NMEFOUNDATION.ORG

