



Fixing Systems, Not Kids: Changing the Narrative of Black Males in Guilford County Schools

BARRY BRINKLEY, ERIC HINES, AKISHA JONES, EFFIE G. McMILLIAN,
BROOKSIE STURDIVANT, AND MONICA WALKER

In Guilford County (NC), the district aimed to change adults' beliefs and practices, rather than "fix" boys of color, by improving relationships between teachers and students and addressing implicit bias among educators, working in two areas: early literacy and discipline policies.

Considerable research on African American males (AAMs) in American schools over the past ten years shows that they are underrepresented in every positive

measure of educational outcomes, and overrepresented in every negative measure. Many educators have developed low expectations, deficit thinking, and implicit biases toward

Barry Brinkley is the executive director of equity in student achievement, Eric Hines is the former director of equity and inclusion, Effie G. McMillian is the supervisor of early literacy, Brooksie Sturdivant is the equity coach specialist, and Monica Walker is the former executive director of diversity, equity, and inclusion, all in the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion of Guilford [North Carolina] County Schools. Akisha Jones is a research assistant professor in the School of Education at the Center for Research in Education and Social Policy at the University of Delaware and a former fellow of the Strategic Data Partnership who led research and evaluation efforts in Guilford County Schools.

AAMs and their capacity to behave appropriately and achieve academically. Tyrone Howard (2014), in his groundbreaking book, *Black Male(D)*, echoes W.E.B. Dubois’s question, “How does it feel to be a problem?”

In this article, the authors discuss how Guilford [North Carolina] County Schools is shedding light on and addressing these issues.

ERIC HINES: What struck me the most as I visited our schools was how little contact, regard, and relationship teachers exhibited with some students, predominantly AAMs. When I received requests from schools to come to their campuses to provide support and mentoring to a struggling AAM, I would ask the student who among the staff or teachers he felt he could go to when he was feeling anxiety or stress. The answer, all too often, was, “No one.” They described being viewed as not possessing any intellect, and as a result, they had begun to internalize these feelings.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE INITIATIVE

In 2012, the district launched its African American Male Initiative and began to ask tough questions: “What are our pedagogical approaches, and are they relevant for this population? How do we relate to these young men, and do they believe that we believe in them?” These questions can be troubling for educators who have been amply trained to deliver what they believe is good instruction, but who are ill-equipped to address race, class, culture, and gender. For AAMs, relationships and perceptions matter as much as pedagogy – perhaps far more than we ever imagined. Howard (2014) argues that schools as social

structures and institutions have their own culture, norms, and ideologies at work that affirm certain identities, yet silence and marginalize others. AAMs face clear biases disfavoring both their race and gender.

The AAM initiative had two major goals: improve AAMs’ reading achievement in grades K–3 through early literacy work, and reduce disparities in discipline referrals and suspensions, since AAMs received suspensions at a rate four to five times higher than that of White males.

Unlike the many initiatives that aim to “fix” Black males, Guilford County Schools has focused on larger, systemic issues related to educator biases and inequitable practices that marginalize AAMs in particular, such as subjective discipline referrals for non-compliance and failure to use active engagement strategies that encourage participation. Staff at each of the district’s schools received a two-day anti-racism training that provided a historical analysis of race and culture and its impact on the well-being of families in the Guilford community. The workshop invited teachers to explore systemic oppression of racial minorities and understand how much of what AAMs experience has little to do with their gumption and grit and more to do with policies and circumstances beyond their control.

THE EARLY LITERACY INITIATIVE: FINDING CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS FOR DISENGAGEMENT

The district hired one of the authors (Effie McMillian) as an early literacy coordinator for African American males in six pilot schools. During literacy instruction, McMillian noticed that some AAMs were engaged and

motivated to participate during reading activities, while others were disengaged.

EFFIE MCMILLIAN: I observed numerous AAMs who struggled with tracking text while the teacher read aloud. Then, when the teacher would ask students to continue reading the next paragraph or page independently, I saw AAMs who would sit quietly and stare at the page. When asked a recall question, many were unable to provide an answer.

The failure to efficiently decode words, read fluently, and increase vocabulary through classroom-wide reading could lead to difficulty with reading and comprehending grade-level text independently.

Building Meaningful Student-Teacher Relationships

McMillian guided her daily work with the mantra, “You can’t teach them unless you can reach them.” She knew that to build bridges, change narratives, and impact outcomes, teachers would have to get to know their AAMs by building meaningful personal relationships. She noticed the limited stories on the walls of the school, and their lack of reflection of the student population. She facilitated monthly professional learning communities (PLCs) with teachers in grades K-3 at the six schools. One of the leading questions became, “If there were no students in the building and a stranger walked through, would he or she know who learns here?”

Sharing Data for New Insights and Strategies

As they embarked on the journey to improve early literacy among AAMs, PLCs conducted deep data dives in which they examined students’ early literacy data to identify strengths and

root causes of deficits, and to discuss various explicit multi-sensory literacy strategies. As McMillian began to engage more with students and staff during weekly site visits, their stories gave her insight on students’ culture, literacy needs, and interests, and these understandings helped frame many PLCs and coaching conversations around how to build relationships, engage AAMs, and affirm their reader/writer identity. One teacher reflects,

Prior to the initiative, I included a lot of journal writing and discussion. . . . I began to include more visual aids, hands-on learning, and opportunities for brain breaks, which made the lessons more engaging.

Another teacher shares how the PLCs and professional development helped her get to know her AAM students:

There was one student in particular who needed extra motivation, and I was not able to make a connection with him in class. I decided to attend his basketball games [at] the local recreation center. He also sang in his church choir, so I attended one of their “sangings.” By attending his extracurricular events, I became aware of the vernacular in his community that was unique and valuable. . . . I was able to understand him and his family through a different lens. As a result, he also saw me in a different way. I was able to engage him better during class lessons once he saw me as one who cared. . . . Our relationship developed to a point where he did not want to let me down.

McMillian made extensive efforts to enhance the capacity of the elementary school teachers to teach phonics and address fluency through the adoption of a system-wide phonics program and culturally relevant texts. She and the

district’s curriculum and instruction staff also worked to align DIBELS data¹ and district unit assessments with literacy programs, such as Foundations,² that offered qualitative and quantitative insights into students’ skill sets and interests.

Many teachers and students began to set achievement goals after each benchmark assessment and conferenced between testing windows to monitor progress.

Results: Less Labeling, More Academic Achievement

Two of the authors, Brooksie Sturdivant, the district’s equity coach specialist, and Effie McMillian, comment on the results of these efforts.

BROOKSIE STURDIVANT: As a result, many students began to notice teachers’ intentions to listen and assist rather than judge and dismiss.

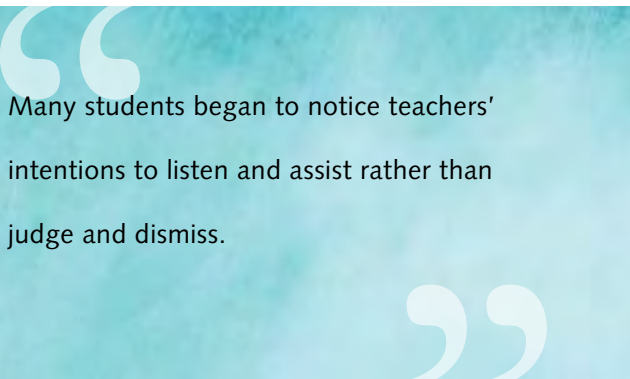
EFFIE MCMILLIAN: Teachers also worked more collaboratively, sharing strategies and providing interventions across classrooms and grade levels as they realized their capacity to intervene. At one school, teachers employed a strategy for enrichment and intervention at a consistent time during the instructional day called *Power Up Time*. What makes this approach uniquely effective and equitable is that it provides differentiated literacy instruction for all students based on need. The efforts minimized labeling and isolation, as all students went to their designated session simultaneously.

In 2016, the district’s Office of Accountability and Research evaluated the AAM initiative. Several schools’ data reflected increases in AAMs’ literacy development as measured by performance on DIBELS and end-of-grade reading assessments, closing the gap between performance of AAMs

.....

1 “Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade.” See <https://dibels.org/dibels.html>.

2 See <https://www.wilsonlanguage.com/programs/foundations/>.



Many students began to notice teachers’ intentions to listen and assist rather than judge and dismiss.

Better Understanding Leads to More Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction

As teachers learned more about the cultures, interests, and literacy needs of AAMs within their classrooms, McMillian began to discuss the use of more culturally responsive literacy instruction and resources that promote active engagement. Teachers became more mindful of the diverse learning styles and more intentional when selecting texts to encourage AAM participation. Several teachers reported that as a result, they could better understand and relate to their students’ culture, interests, and ways of learning.

Data analysis also evolved. Each school incorporated a data wall or notebook, which allowed them to monitor individual students’ progress regularly and offer a more needs-based approach to interventions for those demonstrating below-grade-level expectations, and enrichment for those who were proficient. Teachers became motivated to track student growth to assess the effectiveness of their efforts.

and all other students and sustaining this performance throughout the initiative. DIBELS proficiency among AAMs in one school rose from 56 percent in 2013 to 68 percent in 2014. Although proficiency rates started to diminish when the work of the literacy coach shifted to service all elementary schools in 2014-2015, proficiency rates remain higher at this school in 2016 (62 percent) than at the beginning of the initiative, and higher than the comparison school in 2016 (48 percent). Ultimately, high expectations, quality instruction, targeted instructional supports, and, importantly, relationships were determining factors in achievement outcomes for AAMs in these schools and could prove promising in other contexts, as well.

THE DISCIPLINE INITIATIVE: CHALLENGING BELIEFS AND IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE

The discipline initiative was piloted in three schools (elementary, middle, and high) in 2012 and extended to five high schools in 2013. Author Eric Hines, who was director of equity and inclusion, led the discipline initiative in schools and provided daily coaching to teachers who were experiencing challenges with classroom management.

Unpacking the Biases behind “Non-Compliance” Infractions

In these coaching sessions, administrators and teachers noticed that the overwhelming majority of classroom infractions resulted in a loss of instructional time for minor incidents deemed as non-compliant (e.g., insubordination, such as not removing their hats when asked, violating the standard mode of dress guidelines, or not relocating when asked). While the district’s Code of Conduct provides a frame for all

schools, principals have the autonomy to select the degree to which they will penalize students. Too often, those penalties are harsher for African American students, who represented 41 percent of students in 2014-2015, but 65 percent of discipline referrals. White students, in contrast, were 35 percent of students, but only 19 percent of referrals.

Hines worked to address mindsets and belief systems of administrators and teachers to improve classroom management and disciplinary practices and to foster a stronger connection between school and community. At one high school, out-of-school suspensions of the African American students fell into two primary infraction categories – standard mode of dress (SMOD) and cell phone usage – not egregious or violent acts. It became apparent that systemic policies, practices, and beliefs were the issue, not the students we serve.

Implementing a More Equitable Approach to Discipline

The high school principal and leadership team relaxed policies related to cell phone and SMOD and challenged teachers regarding their approaches to students who were out of compliance. A group of forty young men, the African American Male Advisory, were vehement in communicating their feelings of being policed, disrespected, and often provoked by teachers. Through professional development and PLCs, Hines shared equitable classroom practices, which encouraged teachers to reconsider school and classroom climate and establish a more welcoming learning environment. When they used equitable practices, such as greeting students at the door and asking students about their behaviors instead of rushing to judgment when behaviors were simply unfamiliar to them,

teachers were more mindful of respecting Black male students' personal space.

Results: Fewer Referrals and Suspensions, Better School Relationships and Culture

The reduction in overall referrals, discretionary referrals, and suspension rates among AAMs at this school reflects the effectiveness of these changes in relationships. When student discipline data of initiative schools were compared to similar schools, the reduction in overall and discretionary referrals among AAMs was consistently greater than at comparison schools.

The 2016 evaluation by the Office of Accountability and Research concluded that concurrently with the reduction of discipline referrals and suspensions, the relationships among adults and students improved. The principal said:

What we're working on now is building more relationships, getting more awareness – culturally, ethnically, logistically, locations, geographical reasons – we're talking about all of those things now because we want teachers to understand that when building a relationship, you have to look at the complete student.

Overall, students felt that their teachers and counselors were more supportive and their relationships with teachers improved. Students frequently referred to school-level supports as “family” or family-type members (“like a father”; “she’s a mother figure”).

LESSONS LEARNED

Key recommendations from our work are:

- Require that schools disaggregate all data in a way that allows schools to clearly see and examine outcomes for

AAMs. Incorporate into school routines regular data analysis and, based on that analysis, one-on-one coaching, professional development, and personalized student interventions.

- Make use of regular professional development with teachers and administrators to help them identify their hidden biases and behaviors and foster meaningful relationships with AAMs.

Challenges we experienced:

- Some teachers and some sectors of the community resisted the emphasis on AAMs, and some pilot schools that had small populations of AAMs were less engaged. Implicit bias and deficit thinking regarding AAM capacity led many teachers to blame students and their communities rather than adjust their practices to offer a more inclusive learning environment.
- Even with strategic planning in place, the district experienced policy changes and transitions in leadership during the initiative, accompanied by changing priorities and approaches – including a new literacy assessment, which affected data analysis efforts, and later, a new literacy curriculum. The abrupt expansion from six pilot schools to all sixty-nine elementary schools in the district also presented challenges.

Moving Forward

As one of the initiative principals reflects, “The African American Male Initiative . . . gave us permission to prioritize their needs, and it helped us to question our work with them and our approaches.”

EFFIE MCMILLIAN: There were several major milestones over the course of the AAM Early Literacy

project, one of which included identifying teachers who demonstrated positive outcomes with AAMs. We selected a few to present their work to teachers across the district at our 2014-2015 AAM Summer Symposium. This further showed that the work was beginning to take hold, and teachers were excited to hear from other teachers.

In the words of Russell Bishop (2011), “It’s a serious business, education. It’s about caring for people, caring that they learn, and it’s about creating learning relationships so that you ensure they are able to learn.” The African American Male Initiative is

still alive and under way in Guilford County. Despite challenges and transitions, the work continues to focus on academic growth and eliminating the achievement gap between African American and other male students.

REFERENCES

- Bishop, R. 2011. *Freeing Ourselves*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Howard, T. C. 2014. *Black Male(d): Peril and Promise in the Education of African American Males*. New York: Teachers College Press.