Toward More Equitable Outcomes

A Research Synthesis on Out-of-School Time Work with Boys and Young Men of Color

Jon Gilgoff and Shawn Ginwright

"We believe they have a lot of the answers within themselves," says Keith Bennett of Detroit's Flip the Script. This afterschool program offers academic support, leadership development, and guidance from positive male mentors to young men of color ages 11–15. At Male Leadership Academy, another program in the city's West Side, youth receive similar services, including life lessons from peers and adults provided in a guest speaker component titled "Calling All Men: Truth Sessions" (Allen, 2009).

What is "the truth" about out-of-school time (OST) work with boys and young men of color (BYMOC)? How has the literature that documents the increasing public consciousness of this work influenced program centers and policy debates? Recent local and national attention on the crisis facing BYMOC has contributed many insights to this discussion. Although My Brother's Keeper was not the first call to action on this issue, this White House initiative has raised awareness and re-

sources, some of which have been directed toward developing and documenting efforts undertaken outside the academic day.

This article contributes to a growing conversation by identifying trends in an expanding body of research on practices used to support BYMOC. As the field moves toward clearer recognition of what constitutes "effective" practice, afterschool professionals are playing an important role in empowering and organizing BYMOC to achieve more equitable educational, economic, health, and life outcomes.

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From Problems and Prevention to Assets and Advocacy

Early OST research focused overwhelmingly on risk prevention (Dryfoos, 1990; Glasgow, 1981; Jessor & Jessor, 1977). The underlying thesis was that behaviors of "at-risk" youth, especially African-American and Latino young people, could be understood as maladaptive responses to challenging life circumstances. The empirical study of problems and pathology were thus deeply woven into the theoretical fabric of these perspectives. Numerous studies attempted to explain high levels of drug use, school dropout, violence, early sexual activity, and other behaviors that jeopardize healthy development among "at-risk" youth. In fact, during the decade between 1985 and 1995, nearly 70 percent of all articles in leading youth and adolescent research journals focused on problems, pathology, or prevention, primarily among African-American and Latino youth (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000). Research reflected practice. Afterschool programs targeting "at risk" youth were narrowly focused on addressing negative behaviors, including aggression and idleness (Anderson, 1990, 1999; Wilson 1996).

Fortunately, in the early 1990s, the youth development field began to break this long-standing social science tradition, helping researchers, policy stakeholders, and practitioners to better understand the strengths and resiliency of disenfranchised youth, including BYMOC. Positive youth development emphasized the strengths of youth and the responsibility of youth workers to develop young people's skills and assets (Pittman & Fleming, 1991). By concentrating on assets instead of problems, scholars helped to reconceptualize policy and practice from prevention-focused approaches to more holistic models integrating emotional health, empowerment, and exploration (Zeldin, 2000). Practitioners also began to reframe their basic assumptions about disenfranchised youth in ways that viewed young people as change agents and acknowledged their self-worth and self-awareness.

Since the mid-1990s, as the afterschool field has adopted positive youth development as a core framework, researchers and theorists have contributed to a more critical analysis of the challenges facing BYMOC. They have helped to shift the "problem statement" away from individual circumstances toward greater understanding of how environmental stressors, structures, and systemic injustices disproportionately affect BYMOC.

Examples of early literature in this vein include Wilson's (1996) well-known study on how macro-level economic changes influence choices made by the poor. Wilson explained how a decrease in the availability of manufacturing jobs, the migration of middle-class African-American families from inner cities to suburbs, and other structural forces contributed to caste-like poverty, high unemployment, low levels of school success, and high rates of school suspension or expulsion. Taking a sociological approach, Anderson (1999) examined high levels of violence and other high-risk behaviors at a Chicago housing project, looking particularly at how conditions affected young African-American and Latino men. He explored the development of "codes of the street," local rules or values that he saw as adaptations to economic deprivation.

Such rules, a heightened version of what Pollack (1998) calls the "boy code," show how gender socialization, environmental stressors, and structural inequities combine to make situations for BYMOC more dire and difficult to manage. Referring to these pressures as "commandments of the street," Dr. Joe Marshall describes in *Street Soldier* (Marshall & Wheeler, 1996) how his Omega Boys Club helped male youth navigate the minefields in their lives to emerge not only "alive and free" but also securely on a path to educational and economic success.

More recent literature has acknowledged the systemic barriers to academic achievement, economic mobility, and well-being BYMOC face (Littles, Bowers, & Gilmer, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Young, 2004). These findings have increasingly informed the afterschool program and national policy landscape. Extensive research has shown how zero tolerance policies, school suspensions and expulsions, policing practices, and public policy have all served to disconnect large numbers of Black and Latino young men from school and expose them to risky behavior (Bryant, 2013; Edley &

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de Velasco, 2010; Phillips & Bryant, 2013). These challenges become even more difficult as BYMOC are bombarded with strict gender-role messages such as "big boys don't cry" that make it hard for them to express themselves (Johnson, Pate, & Givens, 2010).

Some afterschool strategies for BYMOC, such as rites of passage programs, have been grounded in empowerment from the beginning. Others, like "midnight basketball," were designed simply to keep BYMOC safe and positively occupied. These strategies have generally been supplemented or replaced by more comprehensive and critically informed approaches that empower youth as individuals, while engaging them, their families, and their communities in policy change to address systemic inequities.

Recently, as indicated by President Obama's 2014 launch of My Brother's Keeper (White House, 2014), philanthropists, researchers, and policy advocates have directed considerable attention toward expanding promising practices that promote the development of BYMOC. These efforts not only provide critical financial support for targeted initiatives but also catalyze much-needed research about the status of this demographic group.

As longitudinal and other evaluation studies document the efficacy of endeavors designed to empower BYMOC, foundation-funded reports are giving OST professionals useful guidance. Examples include the Ford Foundation's 2008 *Why We Can't Wait* (Littles et al., 2008) and the California Endowment and Rand Corporation's solution-focused *Reparable Harm* (Davis, Kilburn, & Schultz, 2009). In a valuable report published by the Movement Strategy Center in Oakland, CA (Lahoud, 2013), the California Alliance for Boys and Young Men of Color recognized the increase in coordinated efforts on the local, state, and national levels in the following declaration: "There is a movement building."

Methodology and Guiding Questions

For this research synthesis, we examined empirical research published from 1990 to the present. Our literature review focused on studies of OST initiatives with an intentional focus on BYMOC. In all, we reviewed approximately 55 articles and categorized them into themes according to their findings and strategies. Because OST initiatives that specifically aim to empower BYMOC are relatively new, there are few long-term evaluation studies providing clear and convincing evidence of effective practice. This article therefore focuses on general trends, which we call "prevailing" practices in the field.

Besides journal articles, we gathered key reports and documents from foundations, community-based programs, and advocacy groups. This inclusive approach was based

in part on the newness of OST work with BYMOC as a formal field of practice. Perhaps more importantly, our approach recognizes that the forces that can leave BYMOC marginalized and even criminalized are the same forces that may exclude practice- and community-based evidence from traditional research.

Our research synthesis focused on three guiding questions, the first of which we explored above:

1. What is the historical context of BYMOC OST work?
2. What are trends in the literature on current OST opportunities for BYMOC?
3. What constitutes gender- and culture-appropriate practice, whether delivered to males only or to mixed-gender groups?

Below we highlight the answers to these questions, with examples of how key strategies are being implemented, particularly in the Bay Area of Northern California, our home base. We then summarize our findings and identify gaps in the literature that indicate a need for further research.

Prevailing OST Practices

The first two categories of practices outlined below—rites of passage and mentoring—are drawn from Woodland's (2008) review of the influence of afterschool programs on young Black males. The third, which we call enrichment, is similar to the one Woodland calls "extracurricular activities." To these we have added two more categories, based on recent trends in OST programming: academic strategies and policy advocacy. We have also expanded on Woodland's findings to include male youth from ethnic backgrounds other than African American. Rites of passage programming, which has been documented as a gender- and culture-specific practice for the longest time, is generally implemented in single-sex groups. The other four strategies may be delivered in single-sex or mixed groups; they therefore offer the opportunity for more OST professionals to apply them. As Noguera (2012) points out, male-only interventions are not the only way to empower BYMOC, nor have they been proven the most effective.

Although these five strategies are conceptually distinct, in practice effective programs avoid a "magic bullet" approach. Instead, they often combine one or more strategies holistically to build resiliency and facilitate success (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Rites of Passage

Rites of passage (ROP) programming addresses the needs of BYMOC by focusing on restorative strategies rooted in youths' culture of origin. ROP programs generally focus

on cultural principles and practices that help boys develop into men. ROP programs posit that, whatever the ethnic background of the youth served, rediscovering their culture builds ethnic pride; strengthens knowledge of their history; and fosters a worldview that values community, balance, and harmony.

One seminal book that helped to spawn ROP programs for African-American youth is *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* by Jawanza Kunjufu (1990). Afrocentric ROP models draw on the Seven Principles of Nguzo Saba (Karenga, 1998, cited in Boyd-Franklin, 2003). In such programs, rituals play a predominant role, including the pouring of libation to honor personal and historical ancestors (Harvey & Hill, 2004). Afrocentric ROP programs have been widely implemented in OST and have been written about for decades.

The spread of gender-specific ROP programming for other cultural groups is a more recent phenomenon. As Latinos are the fastest-growing minority group in the U.S. (Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson 2010), and inequitable outcomes for them are a major concern, culturally based initiatives for Latino males have been sprouting up in OST settings and the literature. Like Afrocentric programs, ROP programs for Latino males emphasize ritual, including burning sage and facing different directions as a group to honor males, females, children, ancestors, and the earth. The National Compadres Network has various ROP curricula, including one called La Cultura Cura, which facilitates traditional community healing and cohesion (National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute, 2012). El Joven Noble, a nationally recognized evidence-based ROP curriculum (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012), uses indigenous principles and practices to develop leadership and guide male youth along their path to manhood. The curriculum also helps prevent unhealthy behaviors such as substance abuse, gang violence, relationship violence, and school failure (Tello, Cervantes, Córdova, & Santos, 2010).

One program that is grounded in ROP but also integrates academic support, mentorship, health and wellness, and career development is Latino Men and Boy's Program of the Unity Council, in Oakland, CA (Community Crime Prevention Associates, 2012). Using the Joven Noble cur-

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riculum, this program helps ground Latino youth in their culture, developing core personal and interpersonal values such as respeto, familismo, personalismo, and colectivismo. Located in school-based health centers, it also facilitates males' comfort with and access to other needed assistance in a full-service community school model.

Mentoring

Mentoring strategies aim to provide positive and consistent male role models for BYMOC. Mentoring is one purpose afterschool programs have historically been able to fulfill for youth generally (Bulanda & Tyson McCrea, 2013). Mentoring programs for BYMOC supplement the efforts of fathers and other positive male role models. While many men serve this role, both inside and outside of the family, researchers have found that African-American and Latino boys and teens were three times less likely than their white counterparts to identify a male role model in their lives (Washington, Johnson, Jones, & Langs, 2007).

As one-on-one adult-child off-site mentoring programs often have long waiting lists for male mentors, OST programs are increasingly offering group mentoring. Such efforts not only facilitate connection with a caring adult role model, but also have been shown to build social skills, relationships with people outside the group, and academic performance and attitudes (Herrerra, Zoua, & Gale, 2002).

One Bay Area organization uses a cascading group mentoring model: Adult men offer manhood training to older male youth, who in turn mentor younger boys. Grounded in ROP and youth development strategies, Brothers on the Rise uses daily rituals such as recitation and analysis of culturally based "words of wisdom," including proverbs, Spanish-language *dichos*, hip-hop lyrics, and youths' digital stories. As a model program for BYMOC (Davis, 2009), Brothers on the Rise combines mentoring strategies, leadership development, job training, parent education, and staff training. It also helps diversify the human services workforce by providing career pipeline programming for young men focused on these professions, while building cultural competence to help schools and agencies serve this population more effectively (Gilgoff & Seals, 2013).

Enrichment

Enrichment strategies offer skill building and leadership development through engaging modalities such as sports, media, arts, and technology. These initiatives are grounded in learning strategies that both research and practice have shown to be particularly effective for males, including kinesthetic and project-based strategies (Gurian & Stevens, 2011). Although most OST enrichment activities are typically mixed gender, some, such as boys' writing clubs or sports teams, present opportunities to infuse gender-specific strategies.

Practitioners looking to make mixed-gender programs more responsive to males may learn from Youth Radio. This Oakland, CA, organization serves high school aged males and females with media production classes, case management, academic and career advising, and nutrition education. Besides using a media-based modality that many BYMOC find engaging, Youth Radio facilitates gender-specific groups. Its award-winning radio pieces have explored issues of concern to BYMOC, including cyberbullying and work-life-school balance. With their multilayered book title *Drop That Knowledge*, Soep and Chávez (2010) convey how Youth Radio gives voice to youth wisdom and analysis while encouraging staff to "drop" the expert posture that interferes with empowerment.

Academic Strategies

Academic strategies aim to increase and support school success for BYMOC. Academic initiatives help to bridge the achievement gap, which, although it is greatest for African-American males (Kirp, 2010), also affects Latino males and other ethnic minorities. Academic support, particularly for high school youth, often includes college preparation activities. Recognizing that BYMOC need jobs—a need that is particularly great because of gender socialization to be a breadwinner, media images promoting financial excess, peer pressure to engage in illicit money-making activities such as the drug trade, and requests for contributions to the family income—many college prep programs also integrate career readiness activities (Smith, 2012), including paid internships.

A catalyst in the BYMOC movement, particularly around academic success for African-American boys,

the Schott Foundation for Education has been active in identifying practices to close the achievement gap and providing tools for youth constituents and adult allies to organize for systemic change. Key characteristics of model high schools named in the foundation's report *A Positive Future for Black Boys* (Sen, 2006) include a college prep curriculum accessible to all students, fair discipline policies, and a strong focus on teacher quality, including selective hiring and ongoing staff development.

Two Bay Area programs addressing academic achievement are the Oakland Unified School District's African American Male Achievement Initiative (AAMA) and the College Bound Brotherhood. The AAMA provides manhood development programming to middle and high school young men, while working at the systemic level to facilitate success and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. The College Bound Brotherhood is a network that facilitates information sharing, outreach, joint events, and technical training for agencies working to facilitate African-American males' entry into and completion of higher education. Both programs use media and the arts, including oral histories created with modern tools such as spoken word poetry and video, to give voice to the African-American male struggle.

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Policy Advocacy

Policy advocacy strategies engage BYMOC in exploring the root causes of structural barriers to their success, such as poor-quality schools, limited job opportunities, sentencing laws, and policing practices. Such initiatives build awareness and engage youth in personal and political transformation through consciousness raising, research, and organizing. In this context, a personal discussion about coping with obstacles becomes a form of political education, contributing to the radical healing that can occur alongside an activist approach (Ginwright, 2010).

In the Movement Strategy Center report on *What Works* to improve conditions and health outcomes for BYMOC, Lahoud (2013) highlights the need to "change the conversation" (p. 8), shifting from "marginalization to stepping into power" (p. 10). As a best practice from California's Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, the article cites

networks of youth in cities throughout the state who are organizing peers and working with local leaders. Through these efforts, male youth are taking action and advocating for policies and programs that not only meet their needs but also create more just and equitable communities.

One program that engages BYMOC in this way is the Los Angeles County coalition Brothers, Sons, Selves, organized by Liberty Hill. This initiative validates participants' feelings of being pushed out of schools and their assertion that, if they and their peers had jobs, they would not be pulled toward gangs. The organization helps catalyze BYMOC not only to succeed as individuals but also to address inequities such as disproportionate suspension rates and minority contact with the police. Using participatory research, youth identify issues they'd like to change. Then, through organizing efforts, they join with adult allies from community-based organizations and with other local leaders to take collective action. One victory the group achieved in 2013 was the "School Climate Bill of Rights" passed by the Los Angeles and Long Beach school districts (Liberty Hill, n.d.).

In the Bay Area, the Urban Strategies Council coordinates the work of the Oakland-Alameda County Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, which has also worked with youth-serving organizations to rally BYMOC around policy initiatives crafted by the Assembly's Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color (2012). Participating youth helped inform recommendations and built local coalitions that continue to advocate for state laws affecting BYMOC in the education, employment, and criminal justice systems.

Conclusions, Cautions, and Needs for Further Research

The evolution of OST programs serving BYMOC and the research documenting such initiatives has involved shifts in both approach and implementation. While earlier programs focused on problems and prevention, more recent ones are grounded in assets and empowerment. In the past, individual behaviors were targeted for change, and environmental conditions were cited as predominant influences. In the present, issues are often understood more systemically. Accordingly, goals and activities center not just on personal growth and effective programs, but also

on organizing youth, partnering them with adult allies, and collectively working toward just and equitable policies.

Similarly, though researchers, practitioners, and funders have focused on establishing evidence-based practices since the 1990s (Lieberman et al., 2010), they have increasingly recognized the need to document community-defined and practice-based evidence. This kind of evidence has been relevant in our synthesis because it incorporates the traditions of diverse communities. Moreover, practice-based evidence is particularly useful for exploring issues that have not been studied extensively using traditional empirical science. To capture practice-based evidence, our synthesis included not just books and journal articles, but also web sites and reports from foundations and OST organizations. Mirroring our field's evolution towards a youth empowerment approach, we intentionally included sources that feature youth voice. Though most of the prevailing practices outlined in this article may not be labeled as "evidence-based practice," they do hold the promise to improve millions of lives.

With the stakes so high, researchers, including those affiliated with funders, need to consider the balance between documenting evidence-based approaches and highlighting practice- and community-based evidence, emerging practices, or simply innovation. The complexity, severity, and urgency of the issues affecting BYMOC make it critical that strategies be tested and documented without fear of failure. Because practice-based evidence is inherently inclusive of cultural norms (Lieberman et al., 2010), it should be included in plans for program replication. Uplifting practice-based evidence will help counteract the unfair privilege that evidence-based practices continue to enjoy.

Still, although researchers must capture grassroots practices in the emerging field of practice with BYMOC, OST programs working with BYMOC must also emphasize results to maximize the impact and longevity of their efforts. Program managers, site coordinators, and frontline staff must be committed to achieving meaningful goals. Their results will enable researchers to document successes and lessons learned. This documentation can lead in turn to informed funding decisions, which have proven difficult to achieve without sufficient evaluation evidence (Lindsey, 2010).

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Organizations serving BYMOC, which may be small and grassroots, must partner with the research community, including large and well-resourced universities, to launch longitudinal studies that document program models and further establish what works. Participatory action research offers promise as a youth-centered research methodology (Randolph-Back, 2005) that helps to ensure that recognized best practices are established at least in part by the BYMOC themselves.

When researchers and organizations jointly dedicate themselves to establishing proven models, they are more likely to sustain long-term focus on the needs and contributions of BMYOC—though, like increased attention to other causes, this focus is not guaranteed to last forever. Serving the needs of BYMOC must not become a passing fad. Funders—who increasingly contribute to this literature, drive discourse, and affect decision making—should heed the warning of the Cornerstone Consulting Group (cited in Weiss, Coffman, & Bohan-Baker, 2002) against "foundations that too often fail to do enough, early enough, to ensure sustainability" (p. 9).

Looking more closely over time at the still-developing field of positive youth development, researchers will have the opportunity to create a more coherent framework for understanding gender differences, an issue that still lacks clarity at this point (Vo & Park, 2009). With a better idea of how young men develop differently from young women, gender-specific and responsive programs for BYMOC could be further strengthened. A deeper exploration of gender must include finding strategies to engage and empower BYMOC who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, two spirit, or other identifications that don't fit into traditional gender constructions.

Another need for future research is studies of OST work with cultural groups that have not received as much attention as African Americans and Latinos in the emerging BYMOC literature, including the Native American and Asian-Pacific Islander communities. "Widening the lens" on BYMOC (Ahuja & Chlala, 2013) will lead to further exploration of how the field works with youth from these and other cultures, including youth who identify as Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, or South Asian.

Developing a more robust and diverse literature that both examines under-researched populations and raises new questions about BYMOC groups that have received more attention will help the OST field to inform and inspire a new generation of important practice and policy initiatives. Though our synthesis by no means captures all the available research, we hope it will raise awareness and catalyze action toward more effective practice, more expansive research, and more equitable outcomes for BYMOC.

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