# Toward More Equitable Outcomes: A Research Synthesis on Out-of-School Time Work with Boys and Young Men of Color

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# *Introduction*

Boys and young men of color (BYMOC) face a number of obstacles to educational success, economic mobility, and well-being (Young 2004; Littles, Bowers and Gilmer 2008; Noguera 2008). Structural barriers including poor-quality schools and fewer job opportunities have limited the life chances for BYMOC in comparison to their white and female counterparts. Extensive research has shown how zero tolerance, suspensions/expulsions, policing practices, and public policy have all contributed to disproportionate numbers of Black and Latino young men being disconnected from school, and exposed to risky behavior (Edley and de Velasco 2010; Bryant 2013; Phillips and Bryant 2013). These challenges become more difficult for BYMOC to cope with and respond to effectively given they are also bombarded with messages such as “big boys don’t cry” and have to work harder to express themselves (Johnson, Pate and Givens 2012).

It is within this context that out-of-school time programs can play a significant role in supporting BYMOC to successfully navigate life challenges. Research suggests, however, that afterschool programs have historically been narrowly focused on addressing negative behaviors, including violence, aggression, idleness, and survival strategies ([Anderson 1990](#_ENREF_1); [Wilson 1996](#_ENREF_15); [Anderson 1999](#_ENREF_2)). This myopic focus has a long tradition in social science, and as a result, researchers, policy stakeholders, and practitioners have not adequately understood the strengths of this resilient group.

Over the past decade, however, there has been increasing attention given to out-of-school time strategies that build upon the assets of BYMOC. These approaches empower youth as individuals, and engage communities in policy level change work to collectively address systemic inequities. During this time, considerable philanthropic, research and policy attention has been directed towards expanding promising practices that promote the development of BYMOC. National, regional and local foundations are increasingly supporting initiatives focused on this group. These philanthropic efforts not only provide critically needed financial support for new initiatives, but also catalyze much needed research about the status of this population.

Describing the dire need for movement around this issue, the Ford Foundation entitled its 2008 report, “Why we can’t wait: A Case for Philanthropic Action: Opportunities for Improving Life Outcomes” (Littles, Bowers and Gilmer 2008). On a state level, the California Endowment and researchers from the Rand Corporation used a solution-focused title for their paper, “Reparable Harm,” (Davis, Kilburn and Schultz 2009).

With a growing number of organizations dedicating resources to this issue, the Oakland, CA-based Movement Strategy Center was equipped with enough data on effective practice to entitle its paper, “What Works: Transforming Conditions and Health Outcomes for Boys and Young Men of Color” (Lahoud 2013). Within this valuable report, the California Alliance for Boys and Young Men of Color declared: “There is a movement building.”

This research synthesis focuses on two guiding questions. First, what are the trends in the literature regarding out-of-school opportunities for BYMOC? Second, what constitutes gender and culturally responsive practice within out of school time? Within the article, we provide a background discussion on the context of out-of-school time programs for BYMOC. Next we highlight key strategies identified in the literature which support this population, with an example of how each is being implemented within the field. We conclude by identifying gaps in the literature which indicate need for further research.

***From Problem Prevention to Asset and Movement Building***

In order to understand the current state of out-of school opportunities for BYMOC, this section provides a chronological review of dominant views, theories and strategies used to support this population. Since the early 1960s, research, and public policy have all made dramatic shifts in order to more effectively empower this group.

The communities in which many BYMOC live, play, look for work, and attend school have been influenced by a host of social problems. Caste-like poverty, joblessness, and violence have all influenced how afterschool programs work with BYMOC. Perhaps Wilson’s (1996) well-known study on the persistence of poverty is emblematic of how social science research understands the social context which shape afterschool programs for this population. Wilson argued that structural economic changes shape choices made by the urban poor, and ultimately lead to conditions that create and sustain poverty, including social disintegration and eroding community and family values. Within this framework, BYMOC in urban communities adopt behaviors, values and attitudes that are barriers to educational achievement, economic mobility or civic participation. Wilson and others suggests that for young men of color, these behaviors are at odds with mainstream values and therefore explain disproportionality in suspensions and school success (Wilson 1996).

Similarly building from this premise, Elijah Anderson’s (1999) ethnography of black families in Philadelphia details how rules, norms, and values unique to urban poverty foster violence and other problematic behaviors among “street” families while “decent” families struggle to maintain mainstream values, beliefs and behaviors. Anderson’s view of violent and high-risk behavior, particularly related to young African American and Latino men, is viewed as a function of local beliefs and values which are adaptations to economic deprivation. The resulting “codes of the street” are a heightened version of what Pollack (1998) calls the “boy code,” and shows how gender socialization, environmental stressors and structural inequities combine to make situations for BYMOC more dire and difficult to manage.

Similar conclusions are made about the role of social networks in black youth. Mercer Sullivan (1989) draws similar conclusions about the relationship between crime, economic despair and social organization. He argued that the “distinctive crime patterns of the Projectville group derived not only from the ecological and demographic characteristics but also from the social organization of their environment” (p. 150). Sullivan argues that black youth, unlike white youth who benefit from strong social networks that connect them to jobs, lack social capital and turn to crime and illegal activities to earn money.

Therefore the underlying thesis in early research is that behaviors among BYMOC can be understood as maladaptive responses to limited opportunities in urban communities. As a result, the empirical study of problems, prevention and pathology are deeply woven into the theoretical fabric of each of these perspectives. This is particularly the case for research on African American and Latino youth where numerous studies attempted to explain or show the causes contributing to high drug use, high school dropout rates, violence, early sexual activity, and other behaviors that jeopardize healthy development. Much of the research during this period focused on preventing problems of "at risk" youth (Jessor and Jessor 1977; Glasgow 1981; Dryfoos 1990). Similarly, during the decade between 1985 and 1995 nearly 70% of the all the articles in the leading youth and adolescent research journals focused on youth problems, pathology, or prevention primarily for African American and Latino youth (Ayman-Nolley and Taira 2000).

Within this backdrop the prevailing literature described early afterschool programming for BYMOC. Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, theories focusing on prevention dominated the youth development field ([Jessor and Jessor 1977](#_ENREF_8); [Dryfoos 1990](#_ENREF_5)). This theoretical work has shaped afterschool programming, particularly for African American and Latino youth where numerous programs attempted to curb drug use, dropout rates, violence, early sexual activity, and other behaviors that jeopardize healthy development.

In the early 1990s, the youth development field began to promote asset-building rather than problem prevention. By focusing on youth assets, scholars re-conceptualized policy and practice by placing an emphasis on emotional health, empowerment, and exploration (Zeldin 2000). Additionally, youth development practitioners and researchers re-framed their most basic assumptions about youth in ways that viewed them as agents and acknowledged their self-worth and self-awareness. For example, Pitman and Cahill (September 1991) argued for a paradigm shift from thinking about youth as problems in need of fixing to positive youth development, which emphasized the strengths of youth and the role of youth workers to develop these further through skill and asset building.

Over the past two decades, the positive youth development paradigm has been successful in challenging the problem/prevention model. This shift has moved the field by challenging stakeholders to re-think how to create programs and policies that provide greater support for youth and broader opportunities for their development. The literature also indicates increased youth engagement within out of school time initiatives to make decisions and take action as part of a larger BYMOC movement dedicated to eliminating systemic barriers that stand in the way of their success.

***Prevailing Out of School Time Practices***

We have identified five categories of out of school time strategies highlighted by the literature as supporting the development of BYMOC. Woodland’s (2008) review of after school programs names four similar sets of practices for African American young men, and we have added a fifth while expanding the scope of his findings to include male youth from other ethnic backgrounds.

The first of the strategies we will highlight are ***Rites of Passage*** (ROP) strategies. ROP programming addresses the needs of BYMOC by focusing on restorative strategies rooted in youth’s culture of origin. ROP programs generally focus on how cultural principles and practices contribute to the development of boys into men. 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). Whatever the ethnic background of youth served, ROP programs posit that young men rediscovering their culture builds ethnic pride, strengthens knowledge about their history and fosters a worldview that values community, balance and harmony.

The second category can be described as ***academic*** focused strategies that aim to increase and support school success for BYMOC. These initiatives look to bridge the achievement gap, which while greatest for African American males (Kirp 2010), also is present for Latino males and other ethnic minorities. These strategies often involve academic support, and particularly for high school youth, college preparation activities designed to support enrollment and completion of post-secondary education.

Our third category involves ***mentoring*** strategies whose aim is to provide positive and consistent male role models for BYMOC. The premise that undergirds these programs is that few have such figures in their lives. While it must be recognized that many men of color do serve this role inside and outside of the family, researchers have found that African American and Latino boys and young men were three times less likely than their white counterparts to identify a male role model in their lives (Washington, Johnson, Jones and Langs 2007).

The fourth category highlights ***enrichment*** strategies that offer skill building and leadership development through engaging modalities such as sports, media/arts and technology. These initiatives are grounded in both research and practice which demonstrate learning strategies particularly effective for males, including kinesthetic and project-based (Gurian 2011). While groups delivered during an after-school program’s enrichment period are typically mixed gender, some like a boys’ basketball team, present opportunities to infuse gender-specific strategies mentioned in this article.

The fifth category implements ***policy advocacy*** strategies which engage BYMOC in an exploration of root causes to challenges they face, engaging them in personal and political transformation work through consciousness raising, research, organizing, policy and advocacy. Such initiatives build awareness and then catalyze youth to action around structural barriers such as poor-quality schools, fewer job opportunities, sentencing laws, and policing practices. Within this context, a personal discussion around coping with obstacles becomes a form of political education, and contributes to the radical healing that can occur alongside an activist approach (Ginwright 2010).

While these five strategies are conceptually distinct, in reality effective programs avoid a “magic bullet” approach, and often combine one or more to holistically build resiliency and facilitate success (Masten and Coatsworth 1998). Following an explanation of each type of strategy, local examples from the authors’ home region of the Bay Area or other parts of California will highlight practical examples of successful implementation.

***Strategy #1: Rites of Passage (ROP)***

One model described extensively in the literature are gender-specific and culturally based programs, predominantly for African Americans. The Afrocentric ROP model draws on the Seven Principles of Nguzo Saba (Karenga 1998 cited in Boyd-Franklin 2003). Within such programs, rituals play a predominant role, including the pouring of libation to honor personal and historical ancestors (Harvey and Hill 2004).

Though such Afrocentric ROP programs have been widely implemented in out-of-school time work and written about for decades, the spread of gender-specific programming within this setting for other cultural groups is a more recent phenomenon. With Latinos being the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman and Davidson 2010), and inequitable outcomes also a major concern, culturally based initiatives for males from this group have been sprouting up within out-of-school time settings and the literature.

Like Afrocentric ROP programs, those for Latino males also place an emphasis on 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” is a nationally recognized evidenced based ROP curriculum (The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2012) which uses indigenous principles and practices to develop leadership and guide male youth along their path to manhood. The curricula also helps prevent unhealthy behaviors like substance abuse, gang violence, relationship violence and school failure. (Tello, Cervantes, Cordova and Santos 2010).

One program grounded in ROP, but also integrating academic support, mentorship, health and wellness, and career development is the Oakland, CA based Latino Men and Boy’s Program of The Unity Council (Community Crime Prevention Associates 2012). Utilizing the Joven Noble curriculum mentioned above, this program helps ground Latino youth in their culture, developing core personal and interpersonal values such as *respeto, familismo, personalismo,* and *co-ectivismo*. As part of school based health centers, it also facilitates males’ comfort level with and access to other needed assistance within the full service community school model.

While ROP programs are delivered in separate gender groups, the next strategies may be delivered as male-only interventions or within mixed gender-groups. As most out of school time programming is delivered in mixed gender modalities, these strategies offer a more expansive application of this research synthesis for out of school time professionals. For as Noguera (2012) points out, gender-specific interventions for males are not the only way to empower BYMOC, nor have they been proven the most effective.

***Strategy #2: Mentoring***

One reason after school programs can be helpful is because they provide youth with opportunities for mentoring (Bulanda & Tyson McCrea 2013). While mentoring has traditionally been associated with one-on-one, adult-child, off-site relationships, there are an increasing number of initiatives grounded in a group mentoring approach with activities taking place within out-of-school time programming. While such efforts still facilitate connection with a caring adult role model, mentoring involving multiple youth also has been shown to build social skills, relationships with non-group members, as well as academic performance and attitudes (Herrerra, Zoua and Gale 2002).

One Oakland based organization utilizing a cascading mentoring model, with manhood training from adults to older youth to younger ones, is Brothers on the Rise (BOTR). Grounded in ROP and positive youth development, BOTR’s *Brothers, UNITE!* program utilizes rituals such as “Words of Wisdom,” which include proverbs, Spanish language *dichos*, hip-hop lyrics, and digital stories created by past participants. As a model prevention program, BOTR utilizes not only mentoring passed from male staff to intern to youth participant, but also integrates leadership, career development, parent education and staff training (Davis 2009).

***Strategy #3: Academic Achievement***

To address the wide achievement gap between male youth of color and other demographic groups, many recommend programming not only in schools but also for youth no longer attending academic institutions. The Schott Foundation for Education is one part of a movement driven by and for black boys and young men that engage youth constituents and adult allies to affect individual and systemic change (Sen 2006).

Two Bay Area programs addressing academic achievement are the Oakland Unified School District’s African American Male Achievement Initiative (AAMA) and The Kapor Center’s College Bound Brotherhood. While grounded in school success, AAMA efforts also include manhood development programming as well as cultural competence training for teachers and other school-based professionals (http://www.thrivingstudents.org/5). The College Bound Brotherhood of the Kapor Center links initiatives empowering Bay Area African American males to enter higher education and complete their studies (http://collegeboundbros.org/). Each program uses media/arts to provide voice to the African American male struggle, including oral histories created through modern tools such as spoken word and video.

On a national level, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Forward Promise initiative (Bryant, Harris and Bird 2013) helps young men of color overcome obstacles disproportionately impeding their success within educational, employment and health outcomes. As recognition of male youth’s great need for jobs – based on factors including gender socialization to be a breadwinner, media images promoting financial excess, peer pressure to enter illicit money making activities such as the drug trade, and requests for contributions to the family income – many college prep programs are also integrating career readiness activities (Smith 2012) including paid internships.

***Strategy #4: Enrichment***

While out-of-school time work has long focused on providing a safe place, the youth development movement helped foster an additional commitment to build up assets through activities that both engaged and enriched. However, while some programs may be fun and their spaces secure, increasingly the expectation is that afterschool programming also focus on other important needs of the youth they serve (Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O’Brien, Quinn and Thiede 2001).

To help ensure male youth of color receive specific supports related to their gender and culture, after-school boys and/or young men’s groups are becoming increasingly common. One study of such a male youth empowerment group produced the following findings: having an adult facilitator be from the same ethnic and gender group as participants provides a solid foundation for relationship building; use of an informal curriculum offers a base of activities which can then be adapted based on student needs and facilitator experience; and familiarity with other local community resources allows group members to access these inside or outside of group time (Hall and Charmaraman 2011).

While gender-specific groups are becoming more prevalent and provide a unique opportunity for manhood training, those looking to make mixed-gender programs more gender-responsive to males may learn from Youth Radio. This Oakland based agency serves high school aged males and females with media production classes, case management, academic and career advising, and nutrition. Besides utilizing a media-based modality that many young men of color find engaging, the agency facilitates gender-specific groups and its award winning radio pieces explore issues of concern to BYMOC, including cyberbullying and work-life-school balance (www.youthradio.org). With their multi-layered book title *Drop that Knowledge*, Soep and Chávez (2010) convey how this award winning agency gives voice to youth “wisdom and analysis” while maintaining a humility amongst staff who serve as adult allies to “drop the expert posture” that interferes with empowerment.

***Strategy #5: Policy Advocacy***

In the Movement Strategy Center report on “What Works” in changing conditions and health outcomes for BYMOC, Lahoud (2013) highlights the need to “change the conversation” and utilize best practices such as shifting from “marginalization to stepping into power.” Within this framework, BYMOC are put in positions to engage with other local leaders, organizing peers to take action and advocate for policies and programs that meet their needs, while creating more just and equitable communities.

One Los Angeles based program engaging male youth of color in this way is Liberty Hill’s “Brothers, Sons, Selves” project. This initiative validates BYMOC’s feelings of being pushed out of schools, and assertions that if peers had jobs, they would not be in gangs (www.libertyhill.com). The organization helps catalyze BYMOC to not only succeed as individuals, but also address inequities such as disproportionate suspension rates and minority contact with the police.

In the Bay Area, the statewide Alliance for Boys and Young Men of Color (http://www.allianceforbmoc.org/) has worked with youth serving organizations to rally BYMOC around policy initiatives crafted by the Assembly’s Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Young of Color (2012). Participating youth helped inform recommendations and built local coalitions which continue to advocate on a state level for laws impacting BYMOC within education, employment and criminal justice.

***Conclusions and Next Steps***

The approaches cited in this research synthesis hold the promise to improve the quality of life for millions of BYMOC. As increased philanthropic investments help catalyze increased awareness and action around this issue, the out-of-school time field will have greater opportunity to implement practices seen as responsive to the needs and strengths of this population. Throughout this process, it will be critical for stakeholders to listen carefully to the boys and young men themselves to make informed program and policy decisions. Within the research community, those examining positive youth development will have the opportunity to develop a more coherent framework around gender, which still lacks clarity at this point (Vo and Park 2012). This practice-based literature will help ensure that BYMOC are not seen as problems to be solved, but rather as assets, change agents and advocates in determining their own futures.

As decisions are made about what out-of-school time strategies will be implemented to serve BYMOC and facilitate more equitable outcomes, care will need to be taken to ensure this doesn’t become a passing fad within our field. For funders who increasingly contribute to this literature, drive discourse and affect decision making, the Cornerstone Consulting Group (cited in Weiss, Coffman and Bohan-Baker 2002) cautions against, “foundations that too often fail to do enough, early enough, to ensure sustainability.”

Another issue that researchers, including those directly affiliated with public and private grant making agencies, will need to consider is the balance between documenting evidence-based approaches and highlighting practice-based evidence, emerging practices or simply innovation. Given the complexity, severity and sense of urgency around the status of BYMOC, it will be critical that these latter strategies be tested and documented without fear of failure. This important utilization of practice-based evidence aligns with the widespread utilization of less longitudinally tested but still effective strategies, and particularly within initiatives that incorporate cultural norms and traditions of diverse communities (Lieberman, Zubritsky, Martinez, Massey, Fisher, Kramer, Koch and Obrochta 2010).

At the same time that innovation within the emerging field of practice with BYMOC must be captured, out-of-school time programs working with BYMOC should place greater emphasis on results to maximize impact and longevity of such efforts. Program managers, site coordinators and frontline staff must be committed to achieving meaningful goals that will in turn enable researchers to document successes and lessons learned, and then lead to informed funding decisions, which have proven difficult without sufficient evaluation in the after-school realm (Lindsey 2010).

This means organizations serving BYMOC, which may be small and grassroots, and the research community, including larger and well-resourced universities, should partner to launch longitudinal studies which document program models and further establish what works in achieving desired outcomes. Within such ethnographies and evaluations, participatory action research offers promise (Randolph-Back 2006) as a youth-centered research methodology which helps ensure what becomes a recognized best practice and is established at least in part by the BYMOC themselves.

Another need for future research is around out-of-school time work with groups that have not received as much attention in the emerging BYMOC literature, including with Native Americans and the Asian-Pacific Islander community. This “widening of the lens” around BYMOC work (Ahuja and Chlala 2013) will also lead to further exploration of how the field works with other cultures, such as Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian. It will also result in examination of strategies to engage and empower BYMOC who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, two spirit, or other identifications that don’t fit within traditional gender constructions.

With a more robust and diverse literature, which examines under-researched populations within the BYMOC community while raising new questions for groups that have received more attention up to now, the out of school time field can help inform and inspire a new generation of important practice and policy initiatives. While this article is by no means exhaustive of the extensive and growing body of work around this issue, we hope it will raise awareness and catalyze action towards more effective practice, more expansive research and more equitable outcomes for BYMOC.

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