Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project:
Reflections on a Culturally Responsive Strength-Based Approach

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Introduction

Why Was This Resource Developed?

Welcome to this resource from the Office of Head Start National Center for Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness (OHS NCCLR). We were one of the six National Centers in the Training/Technical system from 2010-2015. Our work was an outgrowth of Head Start's long-standing commitment to programming that reflects well-developed understandings of the cultures of enrolled families. The 10 Head Start Multicultural Principles put forth in 1991, and revisited in 2010, have profoundly informed our work (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1991, 2010). They are referenced throughout this resource.

> *Head Start Multicultural Principle 1:* **Every individual is rooted in culture.**

At the OHS NCCLR, we were committed to ensuring that programs incorporate cultural and linguistically responsive practices and policies to support the development and school readiness of ALL children birth to five. We developed a conceptual model — the Culturally Responsive Strength-Based (CRSB) Framework — to represent our comprehensive approach (see larger graphic on page 9). We began with the Head Start Multicultural Principle 1 — every individual is rooted in culture — as the foundation, the soil that nourishes all else. The CRSB Framework integrates culture and child and family outcomes through positive and goal-oriented relationships that are supported by systems, services, and family engagement. The OHS NCCLR "flower" is a visual representation of this comprehensive model.
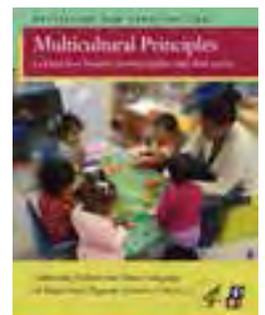
The Office of Head Start (OHS) is committed to programming that reflects culturally responsive, strength-based practices for ALL children birth to five and their families.

Quality programming in Head Start and other early childhood programs incorporates knowledge of and respect for families' cultures and implementation of best practices including quality learning environments, intentional teaching, and family engagement strategies. When these program pieces are in place, they best support the development and learning of young children.

However, these program pieces are not always in place for ALL children. Evidence has been growing about the educational disparities facing African American boys. [1] Many have not benefitted from what is known about the connection between culturally responsive programming and child development. There have been reports on their disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates from preschool. Educators and policy makers have made negative comments about the school readiness of young African American boys.

Awareness also has been growing about the societal context in which African American males live. News media and government reports have documented the gap between the realities of their daily lives and the American dream. The facts are stunning: in comparison to White Americans, African American males are more likely to live in poverty, live with only one parent, drop out of high school, and be unemployed (My Brothers Keeper Task Force, 2015). Taken together, these facts attest to the persistent challenges African American males face, starting at an early age.

At the OHS NCCLR, we believed that the CRSB Framework could be used to improve the early educational experiences of young African American boys, and thus, our project was launched.

> Neither zip code nor skin tone should predetermine the quality of a child's opportunities; however, too many children from low-income families, and African American students in particular, are without access to high-quality early education, which can make them less likely to enter elementary school prepared for success.
>
> — David J. Johns, Executive Director, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans citing research findings (Ackerman & Barnett, 2007)

[1] *The terms African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout this document. Choice of a specific term may reflect the preferred term used in the cited research. Families and children who identify themselves as Caribbean or African, rather than African American, are intentionally not referenced in this resource.*

How Was This Resource Developed?

Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project began in 2013, when we at the OHS NCCLR reviewed current research and brainstormed what kind of support we could offer to the early childhood community. In the spring of 2014, we brought together an Expert Work Group on Young African American Boys consisting of noted academicians, researchers, policy makers, representatives from other OHS National Centers and staff and families from Head Start and other early childhood programs. The group shared their expertise and experiences, identified relevant research, and recommended promising practices from the field.

Drawing from this initial meeting as well as from follow-up interviews with experts and reports from well-known organizations, including the National Black Child Development Institute (2013), we began to frame the project. We defined a process of reflection that could culminate in personal, instructional, and institutional change. Our goal was to help Head Start programs that serve children, birth to five, and other early education programs promote culturally responsive, strength-based learning environments for young African American boys. In these environments, all children are able to acquire the skills, behaviors, and knowledge to be successful in school and in life.

In the course of the project, materials were developed and professional development was conducted. In total, there were 51 trainings with over 1,300 participants from Head Start and other early learning programs. The trainings included

- 8 at national conferences
- 20 at Regional meetings, including a series of webinars for Head Start staff and Training/Technical Assistance specialists
- 17 pilot trainings targeting Head Start and child care staff working in an urban setting
- 6 pilot focus groups targeting parents

Administrators, directors, teachers, mental health specialists, family engagement specialists, other program staff, and parents participated in sessions. At the conferences, sessions lasted for a half or full day. The pilot trainings had a similar make-up of participants and were conducted over the course of several months, allowing for a more in-depth, sustained learning experience. All sessions were facilitated by experienced early childhood educators, skilled at leading discussions that can elicit strong feelings or different views. Some of the audiences were racially mixed; some were only African American.

This resource evolved and was informed by feedback from project participants. It is best thought of as a work-in-progress. The project materials and activities have been modified for this resource. It is important to note that this is not an early childhood curriculum, nor a training guide.

Rather, this resource is for you, the reader, who seeks an opportunity to reflect on your work and your program's policies. Questions and reflective activities are posed that can prompt self-assessment.

Who Are the Intended Users of This Resource?

Many audiences can use this resource. Whether you are a program manager, a classroom teacher or home visitor, family advocate or another specialist, you can take this opportunity to think about how you can best support young African American boys in early learning settings. This resource offers each professional an opportunity to be self-reflective. Parents, too, can use this resource for self-reflection. Throughout, there are statements from project participants about how their perspectives have changed or their practices have improved. As you read, you may find that your ideas resonate with theirs.

Early childhood programs can use this resource as a jumping off point — to take a look at the challenges they face and the approaches they might use to support the school readiness and success of young African American boys. The resource may spark dialogue with staff, parents, and communities. It can be used in different ways by different programs, depending on their unique situation and the populations of children and families they serve. In order to go deeper into some topics in a group setting, programs may benefit from session leaders who are skilled facilitators either among their staff or from outside their program.

> Our jobs on behalf of children demand us to work on ourselves as adults. We need to ensure we stay sharp, making continuous efforts to improve ourselves, our hearts and our minds to assure success in the lives of Black children.
> — Carol Brunson Day, Former President and CEO of the National Black Child Development Institute

How Is It Organized?

The organization of this resource roughly follows the format of the pilot project carried out in Head Start and child care programs. Each section is divided into sub-sections that include findings and quotes from experts and project participants. Reflective activities are designed to help you and your program promote the school readiness of young African American boys. The activities are similar in purpose and format to the Reflective Questions/Activities in the Head Start Multicultural Principles guide (2010).

The sections are:

I: *The Culturally Responsive Lens* — the guiding principles and overarching ideas that shaped the project.

II. *Understanding Young African American Boys* — the views of researchers and practitioners about the learning environments and the process of moving from a deficit to a strength-based perspective.

III. *Implementing Culturally Responsive, Strength-Based Practices* — specific instructional and family engagement strategies that support the school readiness and success of young African American boys; at the program level, how systems and services can provide support.

A reference list is provided at the end of the resource.

I. The Culturally Responsive Lens

The conceptual model — the Culturally Responsive Strength-Based (CRSB) Framework — has driven the project, **Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys**, and guided the development of materials and professional learning activities. The CRSB Framework presents the "big picture" and identifies the program pieces that support the growth and development of young African American boys.

The Culturally Responsive Strength-Based (CRSB) Framework

The elements of the CRSB Framework are:

CHILD AND FAMILY OUTCOMES: the concrete observable markers of progress that children birth to five make towards school readiness and the goals that families achieve.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: the ongoing collaboration and relationship building between program staff and families that is reciprocal, culturally responsive, and supports family well-being, parent-child interactions, and on-going learning and development.

SERVICES: the elements of a child's experience that derive from a learning environment and her/his relationship with the adults in that learning environment, including intentional and responsive teaching practices as well as health and other services to support school readiness goals.

SYSTEMS: a group of interdependent and interacting components within a program that in turn support the program's ability to operate smoothly and efficiently. The systems support support child and family outcomes and school readiness goals.

POSITIVE & GOAL ORIENTED RELATIONSHIPS: the intentional manner and process in which staff engage and develop relationships with families as the families make progress towards family engagement outcomes, child outcomes, and school readiness.

CULTURE: the knowledge, rules, traditions, values, and beliefs shared through spoken language, behaviors, and practices. *Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five* (MCP) provides a platform for a process of self-reflection that becomes the foundation for strengthening our collective effort to provide culturally responsive systems and services to all children and families.

Child and Family Outcomes

Family Engagement

Services

Systems

Positive & Goal Oriented Relationships

Culture and Language

> "What is culture? Put simply, culture is the context in which children develop and in which families raise children. It's been described as the sum total of who we are." — Boutte & DeFlorimonte, 1998

Culture permeates all aspects of a young child's life, including eating, sleeping, playing, and communicating. In the family and in early education settings, children gain cultural information as they form relationships, participate in daily routines, and get involved in learning activities.

A Strength-Based Approach

Coupled with a culturally responsive approach in the CRSB Framework is a strength-based approach. The focus is on what children know and can do as opposed to what they cannot do or what they do not know. Cultural, family, and individual strengths contribute to the school readiness of young African American boys. To date, much of the research in education and related fields has emphasized the negative and proposed interventions to "fix the problem" that resides with the children, their families, and/or their communities. A plea has gone out to the research community to build the knowledge base about the positive development of minority children, the variability within any minority group, and the similarities across minority groups (Cabrera, 2013 a). With a new research agenda that will produce new findings, the early childhood field will learn more about the strengths of African American boys and how these strengths connect to school readiness.

The strengths approach has a contagious quality and it intuitively makes sense to those who reflect a "cup half full" attitude in life.
— Hamilton & Zimmerman, 2012

If we ask people to look for deficits, they will usually find them, and their view of the situation will be colored by this. If we ask people to look for successes, they will usually find it, and their view of the situation will be colored by this.
— Kral, 1989 (as cited in Hamilton & Zimmerman, 2012)

The foundation for the project on school readiness of young African American boys lies in the CRSB Framework and integrating it with several overarching themes. These themes inform the project and help explain why it is necessary to support the school readiness of young African American boys. These themes are:

- there is an educational opportunity gap for African American boys

- many environments — captured in a bioecological systems model — impact the course of a child's development

Educational Opportunity Gap

Human potential is realized when strengths are built on, and the job of early childhood education is to do just that. But for many children, their potential is not realized starting at an early age. And the problem is not with them; their potential is untapped because, in the words of many educators and policy makers, there is an "opportunity gap" (Duncan, 2014). Some say the opportunity gap develops as early as 9 months of age, especially for Black males (Aratani, Wight, & Cooper, 2011 as cited in Iruka, 2013), and the gap is well-documented in the preschool years, when these disparities play out in the arena of school readiness. The project is anchored in a firm belief, backed by research, that all young children deserve equal opportunity, no matter their background or community.

> The term opportunity gap refers to the well-documented disparities in educational opportunity associated with race, ethnicity, class, community wealth, and other factors.
> — U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014

The term "achievement gap" is widely used to refer to disparities in the educational performance of African American or other minority children. It is often cited in regard to test scores in reading and math for older children and in vocabulary knowledge for preschoolers. Often the reasons behind an achievement gap are erroneously cited to be inadequate home environments or children unable to learn basic skills who fall further and further behind. Such reasoning seems to "blame the victim," and is based on deficit thinking. The term opportunity gap clearly places responsibility on those entities, such as early childhood and school settings, that are responsible for providing equal learning opportunities, and so the project embraced this term in its work.

> Asa Hilliard, African American professor of educational psychology, framed the opportunity gap in a somewhat different way in his work (2003). "There is another gap [besides the achievement gap], one that is rarely acknowledged. It is a gap that has been submerged in the dialogue about intelligence and achievement because of the paradigm of human incapacity, especially pessimistic with respect to African students. This gap is the quality-of-service gap."

Bioecological Systems Model

A bioecological systems model captures the variety of environments that impact individual development over the course of a lifetime. Young children do not live in a vacuum, but co-exist in many environments that affect their development, starting with the family, extending into the community, and reaching out into the economic and political spheres. This model was first proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), a noted developmental psychologist and one of the founding fathers of Head Start, and was further refined in his later work (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). While a detailed discussion of the bioecological systems model goes beyond this resource, it is important to note that the model has informed the project work. To further understand the development of young African American boys, the project has considered how these different environments affect the boys and has looked for the strengths in these environments.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Child Development
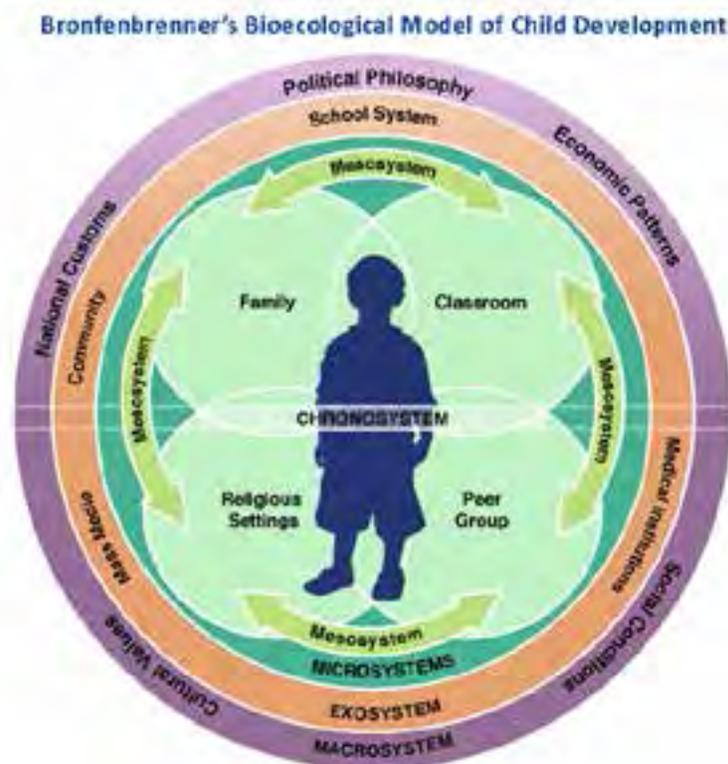
The microsystems (depicted as the inner circle) consist of the individual and the institutions and groups that most immediately and directly impact the child's development. They include family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers. The mesosystem includes relationships and interactions between the microsystems. Other systems represent more indirect influences on the young child, although they may be direct influences on parents, such as employment (exosystem). The growing culture of social media also impacts how African American boys are viewed and treated. Finally, the macrosystem describes the wider culture in which individuals live, including class, poverty, and ethnicity. The chronosystem is made up of all the events and experiences that occur throughout a child's life, including major transitions and historical events that impact development.

Institutional racism and structural inequalities are part of the macrosystem that affect the development of African American boys. National efforts are targeting positive outcomes and providing recommendations for improved education, employment, health and other opportunities. To learn more, see *My Brother's Keeper Task Force to the President*, 2014 and *We Dream a World: The 2025 Vision for Black Men and Boys* (Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2010).

The microsystem of the young child includes the early childhood setting, and for decades, high-quality early education has been known to improve the life opportunities for young children and their families. In early childhood programs, children can gain foundational skills in social, emotional, cognitive, and physical areas, and importantly, develop positive approaches to learning that are important for success in school. For example, an impact study of Head Start reported benefits for both the 3- and 4-year-olds in cognitive and health domains and for 3-year-olds in the social-emotional domain (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). One large study of Head Start children found significant gains over the program year in literacy, math, and social and emotional behavior (Aikens, Kopack Klein, Tarullo, & West, 2013). Some studies show that children's gains are sustained into kindergarten and beyond.

The microsystem also includes parents and families. They, too, benefit from high-quality early learning programs where their role as their child's first teacher and life-long advocate is strengthened. For example, a study of Early Head Start families found that father engagement was associated with increased security and exploration among toddlers and stronger math and reading skills in the fifth grade (Cook, Roggman, & Boyce, 2011). In high-quality early childhood programs, family well-being is supported. African American parents of children enrolled in Early Head Start programs reported positive changes in their lives (Head Start Program Information Report, 2013 as cited in Johns, 2013). There is no question that access to high-quality early education can make a significant difference in the lives of young children and their families.

Building from research about the positive impact of early childhood programs and from the CRSB Framework and the project design, this resource offers a variety of reflective learning experiences. The purpose is to help program staff and parents provide high-quality learning environments for young African American boys. This process begins with examining yourself and your ideas about the school readiness of young African American boys. Once you have examined your own perspectives, you are in a better position to implement culturally responsive, strength-based practices that support the social and emotional development and school success of young African American boys.

II. Understanding Young African American Boys

The Reasons Why

Some ask why the ***Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project*** has focused exclusively on the opportunity gap of young African American boys. Admittedly, there are many populations of children who experience an opportunity gap — often they are referred to in the aggregate as minority children or children of color. Along with increasing public awareness of the negative societal context affecting African Americans, the project focus was triggered by reports on the disproportionate expulsion and suspension rates of preschool boys, and African Americans in particular.

- African American children were expelled from preschool at twice the rate of whites according to national data from 2005. Boys made up 91% of those expelled, and preschoolers were expelled at three times the rate of children in kindergarten through 12th grade (Gilliam, 2005).

- In 2011, national data indicated that Black children made up 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children suspended more than once. Boys received more than three out of four out-of-school preschool suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014).

To say the least, these data were shocking to the public, educators, and policy makers. When preschoolers are expelled or suspended, the consequences are great. They are missing out on learning opportunities that would prepare them for success in school. Also, their self-esteem and self-efficacy are compromised, which affects their learning.

What was behind these statistics? Research (Gilliam, 2005) identified factors that predicted child expulsion, including an extended school day and high teacher-child ratio.[2] Specific classroom factors associated with high expulsion rates were:

_____

[2] *In comparison to other settings, Head Start programs had few expulsions (Gilliam, 2005).*

- Teacher job stress as reported by staff, such as "This child's classroom behaviors…

    — *interfere with my ability to teach effectively."*
    — *may result in someone getting hurt or property damage."*
    — *are not likely to improve significantly."*

- Developmentally appropriate practices were infrequent

    — *Daily use of worksheets and flashcards*
    — *Dramatic play once a month or never*

The researcher concluded that teachers needed help managing challenging behaviors and that a mental health consultation intervention would be particularly promising and cost-effective.

Another perspective might be taken to interpret the challenging behaviors from a strength-based perspective — this would be in line with some of the current thinking about developmental research (Cabrera, 2013 a). A Culturally Responsive Strength-Based (CRSB) Framework could support implementation of effective instructional and management practices in preschool classrooms.

Several questions emerged from the research findings. When African American boys are enrolled in preschool, what are their experiences like? Are they of high quality? The answers were not very encouraging and helped explain the opportunity gap. Although positive outcomes for children are rooted in respect for their culture and in implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, these elements are often missing or diminished in the preschool settings of African American boys (Barnett, Carolan, & Johns, 2013). These answers helped shape ***Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project***.

Knowing the Children

The population of young African American boys enrolled in Head Start and many child care programs presents a combination of characteristics: gender, race, and social class. Looking at these characteristics one-by-one, certain trends in the research can be identified. Then considering them together — at their intersection — the opportunity gap facing young African American boys can be better understood.

Being a Boy

Starting from birth, boys are more physically active than girls, and girls are more social, reflecting differences in brain development and hard wiring (Gurian & Stevens, 2007; Morhard, 2013). Their learning styles are different, with boys needing more time to play and be active. There is pressure on young boys to be

"masculine" and "tough" which reduces their opportunities to develop their full range of social and emotional skills (Pollack, 1998).

Expectations make a difference on performance. Extensive research points to the impact of teacher expectations on boys' learning and the mismatch between teachers' perceptions of children's behavior as "out of control" when in fact, the behavior is typically part of boys' play (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006). Boys receive more negative attention from their teachers in the form of commands, louder reprimands, and greater disapproval.

Therefore, these gender differences have implications for early learning settings where ninety-nine percent of the teachers are female, and boys' active and exploratory learning styles may be perceived as problematic.

Being African American

Children's race factors into the quality of their learning experiences. More center-based and home-based early childhood care attended by Black children was found to be of lower quality than for other ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2010 as cited in Barnett, Carolan, & Johns, 2013). Children's race also affects teacher expectations. The same child behaviors may have different meanings as perceived by teachers, regardless of gender or social class. The implications can be far-reaching in terms of whether children are considered ready for school. Black preschoolers, both boys and girls, with imaginative and pretend play skills were evaluated negatively in terms of school readiness, whereas non-Black children with similar play skills were evaluated positively by their teachers (Yates & Marcelo, 2014). The children's race was the only factor that was associated with different ratings by teachers.

Other research findings highlight the significance of children's race. African American children are likely to

- receive greater teacher attention, starting at 13 months of age, and are more likely to be labeled as "bad", singled out for punishment, and excluded from small group work (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006: Smith, 2002).
  - Therefore, high quality experiences such as small group work and positive teacher-child interactions are being denied.

- spend less time in free choice and more time in teacher-directed activities (Early et al., 2010).
  - Therefore, high quality experiences, such as child-initiated play-based learning, are less frequent.

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- be disciplined more than nurtured or comforted (Gartrell, 2004).

  — Therefore, their relationships with teachers are less positive and optimal social emotional development is not promoted. Their engagement in learning may be reduced.

Being Poor

Poverty, of course, affects child development in many ways. Children in low-income families are more likely to experience hunger and other environmental stressors that affect their learning and development, and Black males are twice as likely to grow up in impoverished households as White boys (Barbarin, 2015). Extensive research on brain development indicates that toxic stress, often associated with poverty, can negatively affect children's attention, memory, and executive functioning related to school readiness (Lisonbee, Payne, Mize, & Granger, 2008; Center on the Developing Child, 2015).

The Intersection

The combination of gender, race, and social class in early childhood widens the opportunity gap and "puts African American boys at greater risk for school failure" (Rashid, 2009). This intersection is critical because it intensifies negative expectations and stereotypes held by the very people — both professionals and parents — who are in positions to support the young African American boys. Stereotypes perpetuated in the media that portray African American males in a negative light have influenced adults' values, beliefs and perceptions about African American boys and have cast African American families as being incapable of providing rich learning experiences necessary for their children's school success (Council on Great City Schools, 2012). These negative perceptions of others contribute to the African American boys' negative perceptions of their own self-worth and their ability to succeed in school.

In short, young African American boys are less likely to benefit from what is known about the importance of culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood. Their preschool settings are less likely to expose them to practices associated with social, emotional,

and academic gains (LoCasale-Crouch, Konold, Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, Early, & Barbarin, 2007). How can this situation be changed? How can teachers and other staff create the best possible learning environments for young African American boys? How can programs ensure that a culturally responsive, strength-based approach is implemented at all program levels?

The project began to address these questions by building on the CRSB Framework and culling research and best practices to develop materials and professional development activities. It is well-known that the knowledge, skills, and practices of early childhood educators are important factors in determining how much a young child learns and how prepared that child is for school entry (Rashid, 2009). That is why it was critical for the project to target the professionals who work with children — program leaders, teachers, family engagement and other staff — as well as families. The project focus was on improving the learning environment of young African American boys by helping adults examine their attitudes and beliefs, build their cultural knowledge, and become more intentional in their culturally responsive practices and program policies. There is nothing "wrong" with the child that needs to be "fixed" by an intervention, rather positive change begins with you, the adult in the learning environment. The project identified the first steps as a paradigm shift and critical reflectivity at the personal level.

Starting With a Paradigm Shift

What is a paradigm? It is the way that people tend to view reality. It includes as-sumptions, concepts, values, and practices. Paradigms have been shaped over a lifetime by many influences that include families, schools, social and professional experiences, and the media — these are the varied environments referred to in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model. Each of us constructs our paradigms and in this case, the paradigm is about how you view young African Amer-ican boys. And the usual paradigm is negative, or deficit-oriented. It focuses on prob-lems and vulnerabilities in the population. It is about what African American boys are lacking — both professionals and parents in terms of skills and capabilities — both professionals and parents and what their families are lacking — both professionals and parents in terms of offering growth-enhancing experiences and positive parent-ing. Too often, African American children and their families are considered "at risk" by policy makers, educators, and the media rather than "placed at risk" by a system that has historically viewed them from a deficit paradigm (Boykin, 2013).

Scientific paradigms influence the ways that researchers in child development think and conduct their work. Research on minority children often employs a deficit perspective, and as a result, the knowledge base highlights the adversity and maladaptation of the minority children (Cabrera, 2013 a). Therefore, more is known about the problems than the positive development of African American boys. And this biased information leads many professionals to conclude that the boys are "at risk" and that they have many deficits to overcome in their learning and development.

Participant Outlook

When educators and parents participating in the project described the African American boys they knew, they were often surprised by their own responses. They used negative terms that focused on the deficits, not the strengths, of the boys. For example, they described the boys as "too active," "fatherless," "at risk," "confused," "getting into trouble."

But paradigms are not set in stone and for sure, the deficit-oriented paradigm needs to be turned on its head. A shift in mindset – a paradigm shift – is often experienced as a revolution or a transformation. It does not just happen, but rather it is driven by agents of change who might be parents, community advocates, political leaders, researchers, educators, as well as other professionals. Ideas and activities in this resource also might trigger a paradigm shift in how you view African American boys.

As the research community shifts its deficit paradigm and redefines its research agenda, the knowledge base will expand to highlight successes and assets of minority children (Cabrera, 2013 a). More will be known about what families and communities are doing to promote the optimal development of African American boys. This knowledge can inform high-quality program planning and implementation of effective strategies to promote the children's learning and development.

Although research (e.g., Cabrera, 2013 b) has identified social and linguistic assets for the general population of African American children, as a professional, you also will need to identify strengths of individual children. You will do this by observing them, monitoring their progress, and talking with their families. As you get to know individual children, you will be able to individualize the curriculum and build on their unique strengths.

Participant Outlook

A participant in the project asserted, "We need to change the narrative from children at risk to children of promise." Indeed, this is the mindset that can support the growth and development of young African American boys.

When given an opportunity to shift their paradigms, project participants made these observations:

- *One father described his paradigm shift, "I'm going to stash every bad persona and negativity in the waste basket!"*

- *A staff person acknowledged, "A paradigm shift is coming and it begins with me!"*

- *A paradigm shift can have far-reaching benefits as one parent explains, "I look at my son differently. I used to think he was defiant and over active. Through a strength-based lens, I now appreciate his energy and how it fuels his curiosity. I celebrate his energy versus shutting it down!"*

Reflective Activity

Uncovering What We Think

Keep in mind that you cannot shift your paradigm until you know what your paradigm is. Like most people, you may hold deficit views but be unaware of them. Once you identify these negative views, you can consider how to turn them into perceived strengths.

During the course of the project, this activity was conducted by skilled trainers. They created a climate of trust and respect that allowed participants to share uncomfortable feelings or observations. Programs that decide to engage in this reflective activity are encouraged to use skilled facilitators.

1. Write on a post it the first thing that comes to mind when you think of young African American boys. (This is done anonymously).

2. Then collect the post-its in a hat/basket/container.

Continued from previous page

3. Read the comments out loud and categorize them, such as "focusing on strengths" "focusing on deficits" "feeling sorry for African American boys."

4. Discuss the importance of a strength-based approach.

5. Here are some questions you might ask: Can the deficits be turned into strengths and interpreted differently — for example "talks a lot" ? How objective or subjective are the descriptions?

6. Reflecting on the comments, is there a relationship between them and Bronfenbrenner's model of environmental systems (see page 12)? For example, which characteristics are primarily derived from the larger society, the macrosystem?

Reflective Activity

— Think of an African American boy who is in your life (a family member, a student, a neighbor…).

— What do you see as his strengths?

— Observe him closely with a strength-based lens and note three things that you notice about him that you may not have seen previously.

Using Critical Reflectivity

How do you make a paradigm shift? The work begins by engaging in self-examination and confronting your stereotypes, biases, and assumptions. These efforts are specifically championed in the Head Start Multicultural Principles 3 and 9 corresponding Reflective Activities/Questions in the guide (2010).[3] The process of self-reflection allows for the opportunity to confront a mindset that is often unconscious and the culmination of many life experiences.

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[3] *Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five.* http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/resources/ECLKC_Bookstore/PDFs/Revisiting%20 Multicultural%20Principles%20for%20Head%20Start_English.pdf

Multicultural Principle 3: Culturally relevant and diverse programming requires learning accurate information about the culture of different groups and discarding stereotypes.

Multicultural Principle 9: Culturally relevant and diverse programming examines and challenges institutional and personal biases.

You can begin the process of self-reflection in a number of ways. First, you can consider where you (and others) belong in the intersection of gender, race, and social class. It is because of this intersection, that many educational inequities persist and young African American boys do not achieve their potential.

Reflective Activity

Where Do I Fit as an Early Childhood Professional? (Part 1)

- Draw the grid and mark where you fit. Then mark where the young children in your care fit. How do the demographics compare?

- Think about how the early learning environment for African American boys (and other children) reflects (or does not reflect) the primary demographics.

In the course of project planning, many resources about self-awareness in the education and social service field were examined and the concept of critical reflectivity was found to be very useful (Kondrat, 1999). This approach to self-awareness starts with acknowledging that we all share accountability for the attitudes and intentions of our society and social structure. Given the project focus on young African American boys, this means acknowledging and taking responsibility for the wider culture (not just your own beliefs) that perpetuate biases and stereotypes. This might mean addressing the inequities in policies, procedures, or services in your early childhood program, community partner agencies, or other institutions. This approach clearly resonates with the bioecological systems model of Bronfenbrenner and emphasizes how many different environments affect young African American boys.

Over the course of the project, groups of program staff and parents came together to reflect and examine their own biases and stereotypes. In order to accomplish this, a climate of open, respectful dialogue was maintained. Talking about gender, race, and social class requires all participants to be even more respectful than usual because these are "hot topics" that people feel passionate about and feelings can get hurt.

Reflective Activity

As you engage in critical reflection, you can explore these questions:

— How do I (or do I not) continue to perpetuate the dominant culture?

— What did I do/think/say with that child, parent, or colleague? Why? Based on what assumptions?

— Where do these assumptions come from?

— How do these assumptions and actions/inactions connect with existing power relations?

Obstacles on the Path Toward Reflective Practice — Microaggressions

The deficit perspective is fueled by microaggressions (Sue, 2010). They are the brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities — either intentional or unintentional — that are aimed at people because of their marginal status in society. They are commonly referred to as "put downs." Sometimes you may perpetuate the microaggressions, and sometimes you may be the victim. Victims may feel that others reject or invalidate their feelings or experiential reality. African American boys and families often experience microaggressions in early childhood settings.

The process of critical reflectivity can help you identify microaggressions and prompt you to think about how to change your thinking, behavior, and if necessary, your teaching environment. Parents, too, can perpetuate microaggressions about their African American sons, such as labelling them as "troublemakers from the day they were born." Every parent, teacher, relative, or neighbor of a young African American boy shares responsibility to be aware of the subtle ways that they might be perpetuating negative images.

The following examples of microaggressions were shared by staff and parents who participated in the project.

Participant Outlook

A pre-K teacher said to the children who were seated for circle time, "We'll wait until Jermaine is ready. He's got the wiggles and so Jermaine, you gotta get them out before you can join us." Not only was the teacher drawing negative attention to Jermaine, an African American, in front of his peers, she also was perpetuating a stereotype that boys are likely to be out of control and uncooperative. She had never made such a comment to one of the African American girls in her class. Upon reflection, the teacher decided that she could handle this differently. She knew Jermaine got very involved in his activities — he was persistent and engaged, and she recognized these were his strengths as a learner. She decided to let him know well in advance that circle time was coming up so he would have time to finish his activity. She also decided that before asking the children to sit down, she would plan some movement and singing activities. This approach would benefit all the preschoolers.

An African American parent recounted the morning when the preschool teacher stopped him as he dropped off David, his 3-year-old son. The teacher remarked how she had observed him interacting with David and was very happy to see their positive relationship. The teacher stated it was unusual for fathers to be so involved in their son's life and she wanted to share some home activities they could do together to build David's skills. The father listened, but didn't react to her offer and thought about it. Although he realized the teacher had meant well, he was insulted by her comment. He only knew fathers who were involved in their sons' lives, and he did not like the teacher's assumptions and stereotypes. He realized that he needed to give some thought about how to respond to the teacher.

Addressing Societal and Learning Climates

Coupled with a paradigm shift and critical reflectivity, the project also helped participants analyze the impact of contextual factors on the school readiness of African American boys. There are many layers of events and experiences that impact a child's development, as indicated in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model. The immediate environment of the family and the early childhood setting make a difference as do events in the larger world. In the case of young African American boys, challenges exist at many levels.

These research findings stand out:

- There is pressure on young boys to be "masculine" thereby reducing opportunities to develop a full range of social and emotional skills valued in preschool settings (Pollack, 1998).

- Black boys are perceived as older and less innocent, therefore they are not given the protections of childhood equal to the same-age White boys (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000).

- Characteristics associated with childhood are less frequently applied when thinking about Black boys relative to White boys (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008).

- Everyday interactions are loaded with assumptions made by mainstream society about the capabilities, motivations, and integrity of low-income children and African American boys (Delpit, 1995).

Increased awareness about the societal and learning environments for African American boys can provide an impetus for staff and parents to engage in self-reflection. Examining and identifying the societal and learning climates that negatively impact African American boys led to insights from project participants. Fathers commented:

- *"It's so important that we build up our boys' self-esteem to dispel the negative messages they receive on the outside."*

- *"I remember in school, that teachers would pass African American children on to the next grade without addressing their academic needs. It was as if they didn't really care about their educational success."*

- *"As a child, I learned to hide my emotions and the sensitive side of me."*

Teacher participants noted challenging school practices and policies at the classroom and systems level that included an unfair evaluation system, expectations that boys are to act more grown up, and lack of validation for the feelings of boys.

Parents and professionals described some strategies that helped them address these challenges:

- understanding and supporting boys' development and learning styles

- being their child's first teacher

- establishing home-program partnerships

- learning to be advocates for their children

- learning to be leaders for positive change in their families and communities.

Participant Outlook

A teacher described an African American boy in her class who was tall for his age and someone she continually singled out to be her helper. She would ask him to help put materials away or set the lunch table. She was surprised when the boy complained about always being her helper. He wanted to play and be with other children. She reflected, "I had assumed that he was more mature and capable just because he looked that way. I needed to remember he was still a boy."

Reflective Activity

	Societal Climate	Learning Climate
Personal Experiences		
Professional Experiences		

Email: NCCLR@bankstreet.edu • Toll Free: 888-246-1975 • NCCLRinfo@edc.org
Toll Free: 855-494-0331 • http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic

1. Think about the societal and learning climate factors that affected your development at both the personal and professional levels.

2. In your current situation as a professional or parent, do you see challenges related to the societal and learning climates of young African American boys?

3. Write down words on the diagram that describe these challenges.

4. What opportunities are there to turn these challenges around or to provide solutions?

Outcomes of Paradigm Shift and Critical Reflectivity

The opportunity to make a paradigm shift and to be critically reflective can reap many benefits as noted by project participants.

Participant Outlook

At the end of the pilot project, a preschool teacher noted, "Critical reflectivity has given me a strategy to challenge my actions and in-actions towards certain behaviors of children in my classroom, particularly boys. I see this same behavior differently now...not as a challenging behavior, but as boys just being boys!"

Reflecting on the origins of her negative reaction to an African American boy in her pre-K class who wasn't clean, took off his socks and shoes, and just didn't seem ready to learn, a teacher admitted, "I was raised in a very strict, straight home. Everything had to be just "so." My mother was a single mom who felt entirely responsible for her children. My attitude to this child came out of my own background. I realized I had to change me. Sometimes we adults are really the culprit. He sensed that I didn't accept him, but when I began to accept him, his behavior improved. He had never called me by my name, but he's begun to do that now. So, in a funny way, he's now accepted me!"

When you take part in the process of critical reflectivity and reflect with a strength-based lens, you can

- gain a deeper respect for other's reality
- develop a self-knowledge and self-questioning of aspects of your personal and professional environment
- gain the courage to raise matters that may feel difficult
- gain the ability to focus on asking the right questions rather than having the right answers

Most importantly, you are moving closer to implementing culturally responsive, strength-based practices that will support the growth and development of African American boys.

III. Implementing Culturally Responsive, Strength-Based Practices

Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project was designed to identify the best practices that Head Start and other early childhood programs could implement to improve the learning environments. The goal was to support the social and emotional development and school readiness of African American boys. The project culled recommendations from the Expert Work Group and other academicians, researchers, and practitioners. Guiding principles were that the practices — also referred to as strategies — needed to be grounded in the Culturally Responsive Strength-Based (CRSB) Framework (see page 9) and build on a paradigm shift and critical reflectivity (see pages 18-23). Based on the work of the project, practices are presented that can be implemented at the instructional level and at the system and service levels in early childhood programs.

Searching for a Definition of Culturally Responsive

The work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, teacher educator and researcher, provided direction to the project (1995). She coined the term culturally responsive — or culturally relevant — teaching to refer to education that is informed by the content of the discipline, and also by the lives of students. Of interest, she gathered her data from practitioners, observing exceptional teachers in elementary schools with low-income African American populations. Then she went on to describe what these teachers did to support their students as learners and people.

Renowned scholar in multicultural education, Geneva Gay, further defined culturally responsive teaching and identified its primary characteristics (2010). You may find that some characteristics resonate more with your experience than other aspects do. While all the characteristics can be considered relevant to early childhood education, some may be especially useful. Those are highlighted in italics below. According to Gay, culturally responsive teaching is:

Validating

- *Acknowledges the legitimacy of cultural heritages as legacies that affect children's dispositions and attitudes and are worthy curriculum content.*

- *Builds bridges between home and school experiences.*

- *Considers the classroom environment in the early care and education setting, including books and materials that reflect the children's cultures and heritages. Intentionally adds household items, such as familiar foods and clothing, into daily learning experiences. Incorporates a variety of instructional strategies that reflect different learning styles associated with cultural background and gender.*

Comprehensive

- *Develops intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by using cultural resources.*

- *In early childhood, comprehensive means teaching to the "whole child." Promotes children's positive self image and their cultural identity. Creates a community of learners among children, families, and staff.*

Multidimensional

- *Encompasses curriculum, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management, assessments, and relationships with families.*

- *Considers all aspects of the early care and education program, including relationship-building with families and their children, quality learning experiences, and meaningful, ongoing assessment.*

Empowering

- Enables teachers and students to be better human beings and more successful learners.

- Translates into academic competence, personal confidence, courage and the will to act.

- Bolsters teachers' and students' morale.

- *Maintains high expectations for children's learning and development. Supports children's initiative and curiosity about their own interests and the world around them.*

Transformative

- Defies conventions of traditional educational practices.

- *Explicit about respecting diverse cultures and experiences.*

- Makes academic success a nonnegotiable mandate and an accessible goal for all students.

- *Uses cultural strengths, such as oral traditions in African American communities, to develop children's emergent reading and writing skills.*

Emancipatory

- Guides teachers and students in understanding there is no single version of "truth" and there are multiple ways of knowing.

- Increases concentration on academic learning; develops clear and insightful thinking; promotes caring, concerned and humane interpersonal skills.

- *Elicits and respects different points of view and diverse experiences among children and families. Offers opportunities for cooperative pretend play based on children's interests where they can exchange ideas and learn to compromise. Builds strong scientific reasoning skills, and encourages children to present different hypotheses, test out their predictions, and report their results.*

Where Do I Fit as an Early Childhood Professional? (Part 2. See Part 1 on pg. 22)

There are predominant orientations — or frameworks — that shape thinking, interactions and behaviors in early childhood settings (not to be confused with the CRSB Framework). Whether the frameworks are male-versus female-oriented, or mainstream culture (sometimes referred to as Eurocentric) versus culturally responsive, they will impact the learning and development of young children.
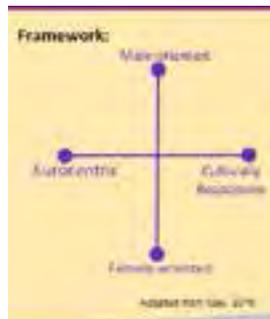
- Draw the grid and mark where you fit in terms of your orientations and views. Consider where your colleagues might fit too.
- Think about the early learning environment for African American boys (and other children) and how it meets their needs and reflects their strengths.

Reflective Activity

- Which culturally responsive teaching characteristics mentioned by researcher Geneva Gay do you use in your work?
- Which ones do you want to bring into your work?

Funds of Knowledge

Each family and each community has its own style of stories, symbols, rituals, and routines. Educational researcher Luis Moll and his colleagues (1992) refer to these as Funds of Knowledge. Through dialogue with families, you can find out about the cultural and cognitive resources of the local households.

An old adage goes, 'The culture of the student can only enter the classroom once it has entered the mind of the teachers.'

The dimensions of the Funds of Knowledge are broad and cover all aspects of family life. The following list is adapted from Moll's work and identifies some dimensions important in early childhood.

- home language
- family values and traditions
- caregiving
- friends and family
- family outings
- household chores
- educational activities
- favorite TV shows
- family occupations
- scientific knowledge
- other aspects of family life, such as favorite foods and playthings

By investigating the Funds of Knowledge in families and communities, program staff can come to know the children and families in new and distinct ways. Staff can build on the Funds of Knowledge to provide culturally responsive and meaningful learning opportunities that tap the children's prior knowledge. Utilizing a Funds of Knowledge approach can shift educators from a deficit perspective to a strength-based perspective. It positions you to ask, "What can I learn from this family?" You are the learner, not the expert. A Funds of Knowledge approach works with ALL families.

Funds of Knowledge and Family Engagement

- creates an ongoing, two-way communication
- values family and staff as co-developing partners for school readiness programming
- builds relationships that are dynamic and mediate learning
- communicates important aspects of culturally-based child rearing practices and beliefs

Teachers also come with their own Funds of Knowledge based on their upbringing and family culture. Their Funds of Knowledge can support or interfere with the children's learning. Early childhood professionals need to be able to identify and reflect on how their Funds of Knowledge can guide their culturally responsive practices.

After reflecting on a Funds of Knowledge approach, early childhood professionals participating in the project made these comments:

- *"I will use the child's home culture and learning as a positive platform on which to build learning."*
- *"Many of the children visit relatives on farms and so I will build a curriculum piece around farm animals instead of forest animals which I have done in the past."*

Reflective Activity

- Ask yourself, what did you wish your teachers knew about you when you were young? In other words, what were your Funds of Knowledge that would have improved your learning in school?

- Think about your current Funds of Knowledge. In what ways do they support the Funds of Knowledge of the families and children? Do your own Funds of Knowledge interfere in any ways with your ability to provide meaningful curriculum that reflects the children's experiences and Funds of Knowledge?

- Think about a young African American boy you know. What are some of his Funds of Knowledge? How might you incorporate his Funds of Knowledge into the goal of school readiness, or more broadly into your program? How would you go about identifying his Funds of Knowledge?

Essential Strategies for Culturally Responsive Practices

These strategies may be familiar to most early childhood professionals and may be well-implemented in many Head Start and other early learning programs. They are foundational to the Head Start Multicultural Principles (2010) and to intentional, developmentally based practices. They are backed by research and best practices that are known in the early childhood field. They link with the CRSB Framework, because they are rooted in respect for culture and strong relationships and lead to positive child and family outcomes.

Often, these strategies are highlighted in staff professional development and parent engagement efforts because they are linked to the positive growth and development of ALL children birth to five. Yet, given the opportunity gap that exists for young African American boys, the project highlighted these strategies as essential to promoting the school readiness of African American boys. All staff can reflect on how they can support these strategies, including teaching and family engagement staff, managers and health specialists, fiscal and human resources personnel, transportation staff, and nutrition specialists.

The recommended strategies for programs serving young African American boys are to

- develop relationships/relational teaching
- demonstrate high expectations for learning
- value social and emotional development
- create learning environments with a focus on play/active learning, including literacy
- implement developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction
- establish home-program partnerships

The strategies are interrelated and go hand-in-hand in culturally responsive, strength-based environments. For example, when teachers nurture strong, caring relationships with young learners, the children's social and emotional development is supported. The strategies also grow out of the processes of self-awareness and self-reflection described in Section II.

Relationships/Relational Teaching

A fundamental principle of Head Start is that learning occurs within the context of relationships. Caring families, teachers, and other adults matter in a young child's life. This principle also is captured in the CRSB Framework: positive and goal-oriented relationships (the stem) connect culture to strong child and family outcomes.

> When boys and young men of color were asked what made a difference in their successful achievement, they answered — the teachers who cared about them as people.
> — Boykin & Noguera, 2010

The central and most critical component of quality in early care and education is the quality of the teacher-child relationship (Zaslow, Anderson, Redd, Wessel, Tarullo, & Burchinal, 2010). Early childhood teachers function as attachment figures, and children who are securely attached to teachers are likely to use them as a secure base to explore their physical and social environment. Early childhood programs are critical

environments for young African American boys as they begin to develop their self-identities, make meaning of their abilities, and see how other children and adults perceive them. Trusting relationships with teachers support the boys' social and emotional development and learning. However, a weakened relationship means that the boys are less likely to be supported in their learning, and the development of their skills and competencies can be compromised. In turn, their feelings of self- worth and confidence are diminished.

What strategies can ensure that African American boys are given the opportunity to develop quality relationships with their teachers? To build positive, responsive, and stimulating relationships with children, you can engage in a reflective process to:

- understand the importance of relationships to early learning. Teaching is not just about building knowledge and skills, but also about the motivation and dispositions which stem from satisfying adult-child relationships (Bowman & Moore, 2006).

- gain awareness of your own attitudes and biases and challenge stereotypes, not allowing them to drive your behavior (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006).

To develop a trustworthy teaching-learning relationship, some educators propose these strategies (Sprung, Froschl, & Gropper, 2010):

- Observe each boy at the beginning of the school year to define his strengths and use them as a wedge to develop additional strengths.

- Create a climate of trust by letting each boy know that he is a valued member of the classroom. Find one special interest of each boy and spend time every day talking about it one-on-one. If of interest to others, ask the boy to share his interest with the class and build a curriculum around it.

- Develop a success plan for a boy who is having a difficult time. Together, set one reasonable behavioral goal at a time and celebrate when he reaches it.

- Read books that address a range of emotions with boys as protagonists. Use them as a catalyst for discussion about feelings.

- Create "stop action" stories about social and emotional issues that arise in the classroom. Use puppets and role play to outline a situation and have children come up with possible solutions.

> Efforts that improve teacher-child interactions can facilitate children's school readiness. In a large national sample of 4-year-olds in pre-K classrooms, teachers' instructional interactions predicted academic and language skills and teachers' emotional interactions predicted teacher-reported social skills.
>
> — Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin, Bryant, Burchinal, Early, & Howes, 2008

Participant Outlook

A lead teacher shared that the paradigm shift away from a deficit view to a strength-based approach had a major impact on her relationships with the preschoolers in her class and their families. "An African American boy constantly provoked his peers, was not attentive, and was always doing the opposite of what I expected. By the end of the week, I was exhausted and had nothing left to give him. I began to look for and find the strengths of this child — what he had versus what he lacked. He liked imaginative play with animals and people figures, and I began to help him use those skills to engage his peers. My relationship with the child changed from negative to positive. The teasing stopped, as did the lack of attentiveness because 'I simply embraced him for what he was versus what he was not.'"

Reflective Activity

Think about your relationship with the African American boys in your classroom.

- How do you understand the way your relationship with the boys shapes their learning?
- How do you see yourself when considering your relationship with the boys?
- How do your notions of gender, race, and social class shape your ideas of relationships?

High Expectations

The biggest obstacle to students' success is the adults who believe they cannot succeed and the behaviors that follow from that belief.
— Boykin & Noguera, 2010

A guiding principle of Head Start is that given the appropriate support, all children can be successful learners and achieve the skills, behaviors, and knowledge described in the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five*.
— Office of Head Start, 2015

How you view African American children can affect who and what they become. If you believe they can learn, they are far more likely to be successful learners. Research conducted on a national sample showed that the impact of teacher expectations was long-lasting in the early school years (Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009). The intersection of gender and race was powerful — minority boys had the lowest performance in reading when their abilities were underestimated, and the greatest gains when their abilities were overestimated.

In order to implement a strength-based approach, caring support and high expectations are essential (Boykin, 2013). Characteristics of high quality early childhood education for African American boys include the teacher holding high expectations for their success and displaying a willingness and capacity to highlight the assets of young African American boys (Rashid, 2013).

What strategies can promote and sustain high expectations on the part of practitioners and ensure high quality programs for African American boys? The research-based, self-reflective strategies discussed in Section II are useful.

- Ensure that a paradigm shift is in place with a focus on strengths, not deficits of African American boys.

- Engage in critical reflectivity about your own personal biases, stereo-types, and misperceptions about African American men and boys.

- Engage in critical reflectivity about inequalities/discriminatory practices brought about by the intersection between gender and race.

- Build on children's Funds of Knowledge to offer a range of learning opportunities that are challenging and interesting.

- Be intentional as you scaffold and extend children's learning.

- Look for the strengths in families and use their cultural resources to build relationships with them.

Participant Outlook

A project participant who was a preschool teacher described how her expectations affected her interactions with parents. "I was eager to talk with the parents of a child who was doing well. They agreed to meet in the classroom at the end of the day. I was a bit unsure if the parents would really come, because they had missed the last appointment. True, my expectations were low, and in fact, when the parents didn't show up on time, I decided they probably weren't coming at all and left the building not long after the appointment time. The parents were disappointed when they arrived late (due to traffic) and I had already

left. The next day, they called to reschedule. In retrospect, I realized my low expectations had triggered my behavior. I spoke to my supervisor about what I could do. I decided that I needed to focus on the positive and appreciate how much the parents were interested in their son's progress. If they were late for their next meeting, I would assume that they were on their way. And I would make sure that I didn't have to rush off somewhere after our meeting in case we did start late." By raising her expectations, this teacher hoped to lay the foundation for working with the parents to promote strong outcomes for their capable son.

Essentially, early childhood professionals need to position their hearts and minds to strengthen the opportunities for learning and success of young African American boys.

Reflective Activity

- Think back to your own schooling and how teachers' expectations affected their behavior toward you. Can you think of teachers who had high versus low expectations and whose actions reflected their differing expectations? How could you tell what their expectations were?

- Identify an African American boy in your life — at home or in your early childhood setting — who tends to conjure up low expectations from you. How is your behavior affected? What is the basis of your expectations? Gender? Race?

- What might change your expectations?

- Identify another African American boy in your life — at home or in your early childhood setting — who tends to elicit high expectations from you. Ask yourself the same questions as above.

- Many people form expectations even before a child is born or very soon after. Have you done this? What were your expectations? Were your expectations fulfilled?

Social and Emotional Development

Social and emotional development in African American boys, birth to five, needs to be made a priority in early learning programs. Research indicates that teachers are less likely to form strong, supportive relationships with them in comparison to other children. They receive more discipline than nurturance, and in extreme cases, can be suspended and expelled disproportionately.

Head Start and other early learning programs can incorporate the social and emotional goals from the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five* (HSELOF)[4] into their culturally responsive practices for African American boys (2015). The goals include children's developing expectations of consistent, positive interactions through secure relationships, first with familiar adults and then with other adults. Other goals focus on children forming positive relationships with other children. When program staff engage in meaningful, caring, and responsive interactions, the boys are more open to learning opportunities, build self-regulation skills, and gain confidence.

Recommendations for teaching social and emotional skills in early childhood settings include changing negative intervention strategies to positive ones, such as helping children to (Gartrell, 2004)

- express strong emotions in non-hurting ways
- appreciate one's own views and the views of others
- make decisions intelligently and ethically

Teachers can respond to boys' behavior in ways that show an understanding of their "boyness" (Gartrell, 2004). Suggested strategies include:

- Defuse the situation to downplay the conflict. Sometimes the situation is accidental, or at least not totally intentional, but an expression of boys' high activity level.

- Calm everyone down. Often boys need more time to process their feelings and teacher interventions and to regulate their responses to the situation.

- Decide what level of firmness is needed and how to show warmth and caring. Remember that boys do not respond well to coercion. Be authoritative, but not authoritarian.

- Talk one-on-one and avoid embarrassing the boy in front of other children to "make a point." (Such actions are often referred to as microaggressions. See page 23).

Continued on next page

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[4] *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five* (HSELOF) http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/approach/pdf/ohs-framework.pdf

- Talk with boys about their emotions and help them label them. Sometimes when boys appear to be angry, they really have feelings of pain or fear. They may perceive that the expression of anger is more socially acceptable and to be expected from them.

- Teach boys to control their impulses. When faced with a difficult situation, they may act out. Create a strategy with the child so he knows what to do instead of hurting others. Self-removal, while not a cure all, can sometimes help boys manage strong feelings by balancing emotions and thoughts.

- Nurture boys because they want and need emotional connection. They need to be cuddled, held, and responded to with kind words and unconditional positive regard. When they fall down or are treated unkindly by other children, respond in a warm and caring manner. Even when a boy is defiant or has hurt another child, let him know that he is still a fully accepted and valued member of the class.

Associated with positive social and emotional development is the building of resilience. Being resilient means being flexible and accommodating in the face of adversity and maintaining a positive "can do" attitude. A deficit perspective on the part of teachers can undermine African American boys' sense of self and their capacity for resilience. Early childhood learning environments can foster resilience in vulnerable African American boys (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007) when they

- promote social and emotional development

- establish a culture of care and respect

- set high and clear expectations for school readiness and appropriate behavior

- provide opportunities for meaningful participation in learning and for success, such as by linking the curriculum to children's experiences, validating home language, and providing for activity and play

Guidance to Head Start programs in the HSELOF affirms that positive social and emotional development in the early years provides a critical foundation for lifelong development and learning. When programs implement culturally responsive, strength-based strategies as described above, they are fostering the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that children need to be successful in school.

Participant Outlook

During the project, a teacher of African American preschoolers vowed, "I will recreate my indoor recess time where my students engage in cooperative games versus sitting quietly and reflecting. This way, they are learning positive skills rather than being made to do something that is hard and unnatural for them."

- At a program level, assess how social and emotional goals are infused into services and systems. Ask if the program climate is responsive and positive for all children, families, and staff, including African Americans.

- Assess whether there are sufficient opportunities for child-directed or peer play, knowing that this is an important learning context for African American boys.

- Ask yourself if you could prepare a list of talking points or guiding questions for a group of your colleagues or a parent group about why social and emotional development is important in the early years. How would you explain the essential connection between social and emotional development and cognitive development?

- Think about a conflict or difficult situation with an African American boy. What strategies did you use that showed respect and understanding of his gender and race? Are there other strategies that you might like to try next time?

Learning Environments — Importance of Play and Active Learning

> The most important characteristic of a boy-friendly learning environment is the physical space.
> — Gurian & Stevens, 2007

For all young children, activity and exploration are key to positive learning experiences. However, the development of the male brain emphasizes spatial capabilities and so boys, more than girls, tend to be drawn toward active play that requires space for large muscle movement (Gurian & Stevens, 2007).

Strategies for supporting boys' active learning include (Gartrell, 2004; Sprung, Froschl, & Gropper, 2010):

- encourage indoor and outdoor large motor and whole body experiences, such as putting mats in spacious areas to encourage boys to tumble and roll

- offer building and constructing experiences

- use the outdoor space as a teaching and learning tool

- plan outdoor play activities as an extension of the classroom

- create opportunities for spontaneous and continuous scientific exploration that allow children to answer the question "What if…"

- provide sensory materials

- change the dramatic play area from time to time to introduce different play themes that appeal to boys, such as fishing or going to the barber shop

All the domains of learning and development that are linked to school readiness can be promoted through active and engaged learning. For example, language and literacy can be promoted when boys engage in learning experiences across different domains, including (Froschel & Sprung, 2008):

- ongoing science discovery with problem-solving and observation

- large motor activity, such as carpentry, music, and outdoor play

- dramatic play that involves drawing or writing signs or menus

- mathematics, such as making graphs depicting children's favorite foods

Providing opportunities for more active engagement and learning through play — that matches boys' learning styles — is likely to reduce teachers' perceptions of their misbehavior. In such learning environments, girls, too, can feel empowered to become more active, independent, and creative (Gartrell, 2004). When teachers and other program staff support active learning, they are moving from a deficit perspective to a strength-based perspective. They are affirming and harnessing the inherent strengths of the young learners.

Participant Outlook

A principal who participated in one of the discussion groups during the project observed, "It's not just the words, but it's also the tone I use with the young boys. My tone is scolding and disapproving when I think they're getting out of hand and rambunctious going down the hall."

In a parent meeting about boys' challenging behavior, males tended to see active behavior in a positive way while females saw the same behavior through a different lens — as "wild," "hyper," and "busy."

- Picture the most "active" preschool boy you know. What words would you use to describe him? Where would these words fall on a continuum of positive to negative? What messages do you frequently send when you interact with him — such as "calm down" "hands to yourself" "use your walking feet." What is the tone of voice you often use with him"?

- What aspects of the room arrangement and the curriculum support the active learning and play of young African American boys? Are there any aspects you think could be improved?

- Select an African American boy in your class. Estimate how much time in an average day he spends in active play. Then keep track. Is it higher or lower than you expected?

- Refer to the 2015 *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five* (HSELOF) to identify how your learning environment could better support children's learning and development across the domains.

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum and Instruction

The school and its curriculum must serve as a mirror in which the personal, cultural, and historical experiences and assets of boys and young men of color are reflected and built upon. Males of color find almost no mirrors of themselves in the "house of curriculum."

— Style, 1996

Developmentally appropriate practice, referred to as DAP, is the foundation for the work of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a professional organization which promotes excellence in early childhood. The core considerations of DAP are 1) knowing about child development and learning; 2) knowing what is individually appropriate; and 3) knowing what is culturally important (NAEYC, 2009). These core principles support the Head Start vision of best practices. In particular, the third consideration is reflected in the elements of the CRSB Framework and in the Head Start Multicultural Principles 4 and 8 (2010).

When you think about promoting the school readiness of young African American boys, knowing what is culturally important is key and helps you decide what can be captured in curriculum, including learning materials, and instructional practices (Hale, 1986). For infants and toddlers, the environment, along with relationships, is key to the curriculum. The early childhood setting must serve as a mirror in which young African American boys see themselves, reflecting the third core idea of DAP.

Language and literacy learning is one area where cultural resources have been successfully used. Building on the strong oral tradition of the African American culture, some recommendations have been made about how to incorporate this cultural art into the early childhood curriculum in developmentally appropriate ways (Currenton, 2006). Some strategies that build on the cultural strengths and promote school readiness are:

- Ask children about what they did the day before, and suggest they share their stories.
- Pose questions and offer feedback to help them become better storytellers and encourage other children to do the same, thus encouraging co-narration among peers.
- Ask parents to record their favorite stories.
- Follow up these stories with concrete experiences, such as illustrating or acting out the plot. DAP supports children's learning through concrete experiences like fine and gross motor activity.
- Provide opportunities for social pretend play which enhances social skills and leads to longer, more complex stories.

Other developmentally appropriate strategies support the use of books that interest young boys:

- Along with fiction, offer non-fiction books about the world around them.
- Include books that address feelings of friendship and empathy among boys and depict boys and men with non-stereotypic interests (Sprung, Froschel, & Gropper, 2010).

A paradigm shift to a strength-based approach makes room for DAP to be implemented equitably in programs serving all children.

Reflective Activity

To teach in developmentally appropriate ways that indicate knowledge of child development, individual children, and family culture, teachers need to be reflective and intentional. Important questions to ask yourself about your curriculum, materials, and instruction include (Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014):

- What do the children already know, are able to do, and are interested in knowing and doing?
- How does new learning tie to their prior knowledge?
- What meaning and importance does it have in their lives while still meeting the intended learning goals?
- How am I providing time for them to explore, process, and apply their learning?
- How do I recognize individual differences in my curriculum and instruction?

Home-Program Partnerships

> The way to improve education and society is to make schooling more central to family and community, while making family and community more central to schooling.
>
> — Bronfenbrenner, 1985

Head Start and other early childhood programs are strongly rooted in parent and family engagement. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model captures the child's world — family and school are at the center. The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework integrates programming, family engagement outcomes, and child outcomes. The PFCE Framework is implemented throughout Head Start and guides parent engagement efforts that support children's school readiness, as well as family well-being.

The Head Start Multicultural Principle 2 (2010) and research affirm that early childhood programs that actively gather cultural information — referred to as Funds of Knowledge — from children's families and communities are in the best position to support children's development. Staff who study and reflect on the relevance of culture are better able to offer meaningful and appropriate learning opportunities. They can integrate classroom environments, materials, and learning activities with a child's knowledge and experience.

Head Start Multicultural Principle 2: **The cultural groups represented in the communities and families of each Head Start program are primary sources for culturally relevant programs.**

By partnering with parents, early childhood programs can help ensure that children are ready for school. These connections afford the opportunity for parents and families to grow as their children's first teachers and thus, strengthen their children's identities, relationships, skills, and knowledge.

Research indicates the benefits of racial socialization in children's homes. In a sample of socioeconomically diverse African American preschoolers, those growing up in homes that placed high importance on African American culture demonstrated more factual knowledge, had better problem-solving skills, and fewer behavior problems according to their parents (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002). When families and programs can work hand-in-hand to support African American children's cultural knowledge, their social, emotional, and cognitive competence is enhanced.

Head Start Multicultural Principle 5: **Every individual has the right to maintain his or her own identity while acquiring the skills required to function in our diverse society.**

All children live in multiple environments as so aptly captured in Bronbenbrenner's systems model (1979). For many young African American boys, these environments often do not provide continuity of values, beliefs, or expectations. Living in dual worlds is stressful for many African American children and their families.

> Barbara Bowman, a well-known African American early childhood educator and professor at the Erikson Institute, provides a perspective on culture. "The vast majority of African American children are supported by their families: they walk, talk, love, make categories, represent ideas, use symbols, etc. even though they may do these things in different ways than White children.
> — Foreword to *Being Black is Not a Risk Factor,* 2013

What are the strategies that can help build connections between early childhood programs and families? First and foremost, is the Funds of Knowledge approach where you gather information from families about the cultural resources embedded in their daily lives (Moll et al., 1992). Then you can bring the Funds of Knowledge into the early childhood setting.

Other strategies that promote home-program partnerships focus on these aspects (Ritchie & Guttman, 2014):

Shared vision between families and programs
- Work together to establish a shared vision of their roles in supporting children and their goals for children.

Communicate
- Put a system in place to encourage frequent, two-way communication and in a mutually accessible language.
- Establish culturally aware and responsive relationships with families based on knowing and respecting them.
- Promote the shared vision with the goal of improving the program and enhancing children's school readiness.

Relevant curriculum and instruction

- Identify aspects of children's home and community life that can be integrated into more meaningful curriculum and culturally responsive instruction.

- Encourage African American families to share their knowledge about how they are teaching their sons to navigate in society.

The Head Start Multicultural Principle 7 (2010) addresses culturally responsive program planning. Hiring qualified staff who are members of the children's home communities is one way to build home-program connections. The staff can facilitate communication between families and the program. Home visits provide an invaluable opportunity to learn about the child, family, and community and to appreciate their Funds of Knowledge.

Head Start Multicultural Principle 7: **Culturally relevant programming requires staff who both reflect and are responsive to the community and families served.**

Culturally responsive teachers are invested in the children and families, as well as in their communities. When they are invested, they are helping to support home-program continuity and to build relationships and trust with families. And when families trust, they let the community know that the program is a safe and nurturing place, that the teachers and other staff are caring and knowledgeable people. When trusting relationships exist between their home-program-community, then young African American boys are more likely to experience a positive, strength-based learning environment. Furthermore, the connections are strengthened between families and other institutions and between the early childhood program and its community partners. Referring to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model (1979. See page 12), the systems are becoming more congruent.

Reflective Activity

As you seek to improve home-program partnerships and bring them in line with a culturally responsive, strength-based approach, you can:

- Examine the beliefs and practices about these partnerships that are currently being implemented.

- Change the perception of parents as unconcerned about their children's learning and development, if necessary.

- Create opportunities for staff and families to create positive relationships.

- Integrate children's background knowledge acquired from their home and community into the classroom.

A Comprehensive Look at School Readiness

Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project recognized that programs must intentionally address the "big picture" – that is, how all the systems and services support optimal development of the children. All the program elements are inter-dependent. The importance of integrating a culturally responsive, strength-based approach into all systems and services is acknowledged in the Head Start Multicultural Principle 10 (2010). The relationship of systems and services to positive child and family outcomes also is affirmed in the CRSB Framework.

> ***Head Start Multicultural Principle 10:*** **Culturally relevant and diverse programming and practices are incorporated in all systems and services and are beneficial to all adults and children.**

The project planned regional events that brought together program staff to assess how the various system and service areas were addressing the needs of African American families and children and building on their strengths. Participants included directors, supervisors, teachers, transportation specialists, and disabilities staff. They posed these and other questions as they took a critical look at the connection between their systems and services and the school readiness of young African American boys. Each team came up with an action plan to implement system and service improvement in their program.

Participant Outlook

A principal of a public school with a large pre-K program reflected, "We have wrapped all our interventions around deficits! We need to change our school culture to strength-based."

Taking a Look at Program Systems

Programs that are committed to culturally responsive practices must ensure they are embedded throughout all system areas. These are some guiding questions that you and your team members can ask about your program systems. These questions can serve as a catalyst for further inquiry.

Human Resources

- Do program staff have the skills and knowledge and the self-reflective and attitudinal qualities needed to support African American boys and families? If not, what professional development activities/trainings are needed?

ERSEA

- Do recruitment and selection processes result in addressing the priority areas identified in the community assessment, including the enrollment and attendance of African American boys?

Self-Assessment and Quality Improvement

- Are there specific program issues impacting progress on school readiness goals for African American boys? What strengths appear and how can they be leveraged?

Planning

- What does existing program information (such as Community Assessment and Self-Assessment) indicate about the needs of African American boys and their families in your service area? How does this information shape your program and school readiness goals?

Communication

- Does the communication plan reach all enrolled families, including African American families?

Program Governance

- Are African American families, including fathers, in your program encouraged and feel welcome to actively participate in program leadership and decision making?

Facilities, Resources, and Equipment

- Does your program consider the developmental needs of boys when planning and designing space for learning environments?

- Does your program consider African American boys when purchasing materials and resources for curriculum and instruction?

Continued from previous page

Record Keeping and Reporting

- Does your program consider the strengths of African American boys and families when collecting and reporting data?

On-going Monitoring

- Is data reviewed periodically to ensure the delivery of high quality services for African American boys and families?

Fiscal Management

- Does your program allocate funding to ensure responsive programming for African American boys and families?

Reflective Activity

Taking a Look at Program Services

To ensure that program services are culturally responsive and support the school readiness of young African American boys, you and your team members can start by asking these questions. In turn, these questions can lead to more questions.

Family Engagement

- Does your program reinforce the importance of culture in a child's development during interactions with parents and expectant families?

- Is the program able to focus on family and child strengths as an entry point into relationships and conversations about children?

Educational Services

- Does the program look at data to see what's working and to determine areas of opportunity to support African American boys and families?

- Does the program provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their knowledge, perceptions, and biases about their relationships with children in general, and specifically with boys?

- Can you identify teaching practices that you could individualize to improve the school readiness of African American boys?

- How are Funds of Knowledge used to support children's learning and development?

Continued from previous page

Health Services

- Does your program explore data to determine if there are trends related to health and well-being in subpopulations and in access and referral to services?

- How does your program promote and support staff wellness and encourage self-reflection in their work with children and families?

- How does your program promote staff's development of skills and knowledge and provide ongoing support of appropriate behavior management strategies? How are mental health consultants and services used to support a strength-based approach?

Reflective Activity

Putting Together an Action Plan

Based on a comprehensive assessment of how the systems and services in your program support the school readiness of young African American boys, you and your team can formulate an action plan. You need to identify priority areas of change, who is participating in the change efforts, what are the steps, what are the available resources, and what is the timeframe.
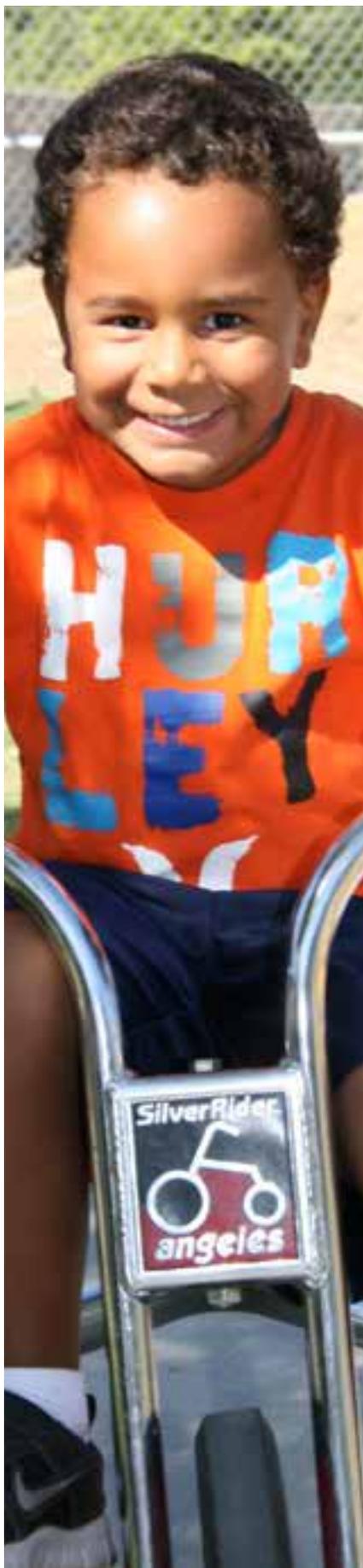
> *"Childhood is a journey. Not a race."*
>
> — Maurice Sykes, director of the Early Childhood Leaership Institute at the University of the District of Columbia's National Center for Urban Education, 1993

SUMMARY

This resource is an outgrowth of the work, ***Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project***. The project design and content was informed by the Culturally Responsive Strength-Based (CRSB) Framework. This is a systems approach to improve the early learning environments of all children, birth to five.

When the CRSB Framework is embraced for young African American boys, there are many benefits for program staff and for the children and their families. Early childhood professionals gain knowledge as they learn essential concepts about culture and the development of young African American boys. Their attitudes can change as they reflect on their own biases and stereotypes and come to understand and use the cultural resources of the children and families they work with. As a result, their expectations may be raised, which of course, impacts children's learning.

Early childhood educators also may become agents of change, committed to intentional, strengths-focused relationships with children and families at the personal level, and to culturally responsive practices at the instructional and institutional levels. They may refine their skills and professional practices as they implement strategies that build positive teacher-child relationships, nurture social and emotional development, provide active learning environments, reflect developmentally appropriate practices, and establish strong home-program partnerships.

The school readiness and success of young African American boys — the blooming flower in the CRSB Framework — are the ultimate outcomes. When early learning programs are grounded in a respect for culture, build positive and goal-oriented relationships with children and families, implement strong services and systems, these outcomes can be achieved.

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