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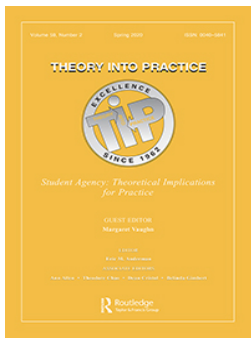
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The (good) trouble with Black boys: Organizing with Black boys and young men in George Floyd's America

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ABSTRACT

Youth Organizing as a tool for social change has helped to not only change material conditions in some respects, but it has also equipped youth with the critical tools needed to engage in long term social movement building. As a result, youth activists and organizers have been able to increase investments in the highest needs communities, gain access to college, and even defund and abolish school police. In the political moment of COVID-19 and the global fight to address anti-Black racism, how have Black boys and young men engaged in the fight for their own lives? Building upon critical frameworks in education, I chronicle how Black boys and young men engage in Black Transformative Agency, which I define as an axis of processes that Black boys and young men adopt to both politicize their peers and transform anti-Black racism in their communities. For educational practitioners, youth workers, and the like, Black Transformative Agency can be a useful framework for engaging politically activated Black youth in their schools and their communities.

Introduction

In June 2020, Christian Wimberly, a youth leader from the Brotherhood Crusade, performed a song he wrote for a rally to defund the Los Angeles School Police Department. In his song titled, "Why We Need School Police?" he raised questions about the prison-like nature of schools. He pointed to the austerity that schools often experience from budget cuts and not having access to nurses or counselors, and he asserted that the abolition of the school police is the only route toward justice. Wimberly was no stranger to the ways that school discipline and broader schooling practices themselves are inherently anti-Black, given an incident on his own campus where he was escorted to the office by campus police and security for having his inhaler on him during his physical education class. The organization that Wimberly is connected to, Brotherhood Crusade, is a part of a youth organizing coalition for boys and young men of color called the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition (BSS), a coalition of nine community-based organizations that work to decriminalize communities of color. As Wimberly got connected to BSS, he learned more about community organizing and empowerment, and he cites it as a place where he learned to use his voice for change.

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In community-based educational spaces, youth organizing is heralded as one of the primary mechanisms to combat inequality. In California, popular nomenclature such as “power to the youth,” and “#SchoolsNotPrisons” have become commonplace in a context where communities of color have directly responded to the lack of resources, overcriminalization, and state disinvestment. (Kwon, 2013; Terriquez, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In spite of the scholarship about youth activism and organizing, within education research, policy, and public discourse, Black male youth are oftentimes presented as the objects of public policy—they are presented as half-beings that need to be “intervened in,” “controlled,” or “fixed” in some way through neoliberal interventions or adult-led advocacy (Dumas, 2016). The narratives of “fixing” and “control” are compounded by the racialized and gendered “crisis” of Black masculinity, where racialized and gendered notions of Black maleness through an anti-Black lens inform superpredator mythology and hypercriminalization (Curry, 2017; Rios, 2011; Shabazz, 2015). Even though Black young men and boys continue to be targets of public policy, adult led advocacy, and large foundation initiatives, their direct experiences with these systems remains overlooked (Howard, 2014). Further, scholars have not adequately theorized, imagined, or documented the specific ways that Black male youth actively attempt to reshape their relationships to social institutions through collective organizing and resistance. While research has documented processes for politicizing youth (Scorza, 2013; Watts et al., 2003), what youth then do with their newfound agency and empowerment has not been explored. Even though voices like Christian’s are prevalent in California’s youth organizing infrastructure, the ideas, imaginations, and ways that Black boys work to transform themselves and their communities has yet to be investigated.

Naming a framework I refer to as Black Transformative Agency, I document the experiences of Black boys and young men based both on my experiences as a practitioner working with Black boys and young men for the last decade in California’s youth organizing and social justice landscape. More specifically, I focus on the ways that Black male youth enact their agency to transform their relationships with their peers and social institutions around them, combating anti-Blackness and the social isolation that comes with urban poverty. Education practitioners, such as teachers, community-based educators, and the like can learn a great deal from young people involved in youth organizing, specifically as educational practitioners more broadly continue to struggle to support Black boys and young men at every level (see Harper et al., 2014; Howard, 2014).

Youth organizing and agency: Building youth power

Moving beyond more general and unstructured forms of youth activism such as attending protests or participating in online activism, youth organizing is the sustained effort of working with young people in communities to build social and political power by helping youth think and act strategically about systemic, practice-based, and cultural changes that they want to see in their communities (Ginwright, 2010; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; HoSang, 2006; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). As youth become politically and socially engaged, scholars have documented how they are better able to process trauma that they have experienced (Ginwright, 2010), improved their academic performance (Scorza et al., 2013), develop new literacy skills (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), and even change policies that impacted them (Kwon, 2013; Rogers & Morrell, 2011). In some instances,

youth organizing is seen as the primary gateway in which young people become and remain politically activated (Corrigan-Brown, 2011; Terriquez, 2015). In other instances, scholars have documented how youth organizing can even be seen as a management strategy to try and control youth through market-driven, neoliberal interventions that are only meant to change young people's behavior, and marginally transform their conditions (Kwon, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014). While some scholars have documented some efforts to drive out radical organizing, both away from schools and institutions where young people frequent (Sojoyner, 2013, 2016), there has been a steady increase in the ways that community-based organizations have become creative in both accessing and politicizing youth to become involved in social change.

Solorzano and Bernal (2001) spell out a framework called transformational resistance, where young people who both have a critique of social oppression, and are motivated by social justice, learn that their primary option for changing relationships of power comes directly from their organizing challenges to power. Pedro Noguera, in conversation with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2013), spells out this experience, stating:

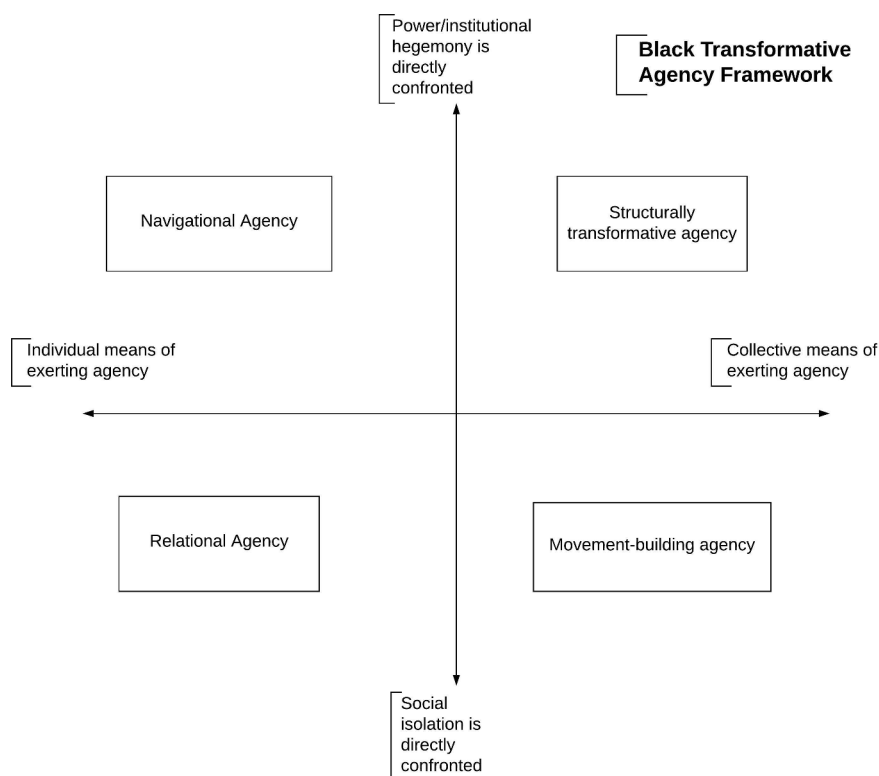
If a student is angry at unjust policies at their school, and they decide, "I'm going to cuss out the principal," that may be a form of agency, but it may not be an act of resistance. But if that same student decides, "you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to organize other students to have a boycott of school," that is clearly a higher level of resistance. (p. 79)

Above, Noguera is highlighting the distinctions between what Solorzano and Bernal (2001) call self-defeating resistance and transformative resistance. With self-defeating resistance, a student may understand that a social situation is unjust and needs to be challenged, however, the way they go about challenging their social oppression may negatively impact them and hurt their own life chances. In other words, one can engage in acts of oppositional behavior, but as Willis (1981) and Fine (1991) have documented, these acts of oppositional behavior to the status quo and oppressive systems alone do not change the life chances of a young person. However, through transformational resistance, which is fueled by both a critique of social oppression and a motivation to engage in social justice, one can then work to close juvenile justice facilities in their area that overcriminalize youth, (Kwon, 2006, 2013), change the nature of college access (Rogers & Morrell, 2011), or defund school police. However, once young people have a critique of social conditions and are motivated by social justice to act upon social oppression, how do they act upon it? What are the ways that young people enact their own agency to change their conditions?

So what about Black boys? Spelling out Black transformative agency

While scholarship has long documented the various ways that Black boys are impacted by social and political systems (Ferguson, 2001; Howard, 2014; Sojoyner, 2013, 2016) in what ways do Black boys and young men fight back? What do Black boys then do with that agency once they become politicized? How are they able to transform their material conditions as they begin to combat their own oppression and dispossession? Agency, as a central concept, is grounded in a transformative framework, where agency should seek to change or challenge oppressive conditions, not just navigate them for the sake of personal advancement alone (see Hays, 1994). This is where I spell out a process called Black Transformative Agency, which is cultivated in young people who seek to combat

the unique dispossession that Black boys and young men experience by adopting individual and collective means to challenge social isolation, institutional power, and hegemony. For Black boys who engage in community-based organizations where they participate in social movement work and political campaigns, each type of agency that they learn in their organizations plays a specific role in their development and in how they work to combat oppression. This process is spelled out in four types of agency — navigational agency, relational agency, movement building agency, and structurally transformative agency, which I define below. Each type of agency is connected to the larger framework, and each type of agency is developed as a result of involvement in community-based educational spaces.



Navigational agency

For Black boys who are politicized, they understand that being able to advocate for themselves and on their own behalf is critical for their survival. Tara Yosso (2005) would call this navigational capital, in other words, the ability to “maneuver through social institutions not created with communities of color in mind” (p. 80). *So in order to adopt navigational agency, Black boys who have embarked on social movement organizing are able to individually assert their agency to directly confront power and institutional hegemony.* Take for example, the young men who learn about the lack of college access. Rogers and

Morrell (2011) document LA's community-led movement to fight for the widespread availability of A-G courses, which are the required courses one would need to qualify for admission to a California State University, or University of California school. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, these courses were not widely available, especially in schools in South Central, East Los Angeles, and LA's South Bay. Through youth participatory action research and community-driven campaign building, young people fought for these courses to be available to everyone, winning the campaign in 2005, with a promise of full implementation in the coming years.

As community-based organizations understood that there have been concerted attempts to prevent Black and Brown communities from having college access, these organizations have made a conscious effort to ensure that their students both had access to college and were able to navigate the college-going process. While I was a staff member at the Social Justice Learning Institute, we would hold entire retreats to walk students through the application process, teach Black youth how to ask for the materials they need for college (SAT fee waivers, counselor recommendations, etc.) and some would even drive their students hundreds of miles to their college destinations once they had been accepted and confirmed their enrollment the following fall. By teaching Black boys with the navigational agency, they were able to advocate for themselves to get the resources that they needed for college. We also made it clear to them how there were concentrated attempts to deny Black people and other communities of color the right to an education, and helped them to see how it was happening to them. In many instances, the Black boys we worked with were initially denied access to these resources, however, they were able to use both their understandings of racial justice and their newly found navigational agency to ultimately gain the resources that they needed. Our young people would go through different channels, seek adult advocates, call their counselors out on their implicit or explicit biases against them, or even seek out alternative counselors on their campuses to get the materials they needed.

Relational agency

For many Black boys who are activists, their peer influences in these programs are vital to both their ongoing social movement participation and their personal growth. It takes a step beyond social capital, which Yosso (2005) defines as, "peer and other social contacts [that] can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (p. 79). *For relational agency, the social isolation that Black boys experience at the hands of anti-Black institutions is directly confronted by young people developing peer networks that help to sharpen their analyses of social and political issues, motivate them to advocate for their communities, and serve as emotional support for them in times of hardship in the face of anti-Black racism.* For example, Ginwright (2010) highlights how care is essential to politicized Black communities, stating:

Care within the Black community is as much a political act as it is a personal gesture: it requires that personal relationships prepare Black youth to confront racism and view their personal trauma as a result of systemic social problems. (p. 57)

As Ginwright articulates, and as a motto of one LA based organization Brotherhood Crusade, *no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.* As young people participate in these spaces meant to cultivate their political agency, caring relationships both

with their peers and adult allies are essential to developing relational agency. When Black boys and young men are able to develop relational agency, they are then better able to 1) help each other grow, 2) challenge behaviors and hold each other accountable, and 3) deepen their commitments to social justice long-term. For some youth organizers, like Jared O'Brien at the Youth Justice Coalition, this looks like teaching his relatives and close friends about race, gender, and patriarchy, exhibiting progressive gender traits taught to him by the activist women in his proximity. For young people like Marcus Pickens from the Social Justice Learning Institute or Kevin Miles from Brotherhood Crusade, the relationships that they cultivated in these programs serve as a catalyst for them committing to youth organizing long term, once as youth leaders and now as staff members. Indeed, building relational agency with Black boys and young men connects to their sense of both personal and political identity, which then enables them to act collectively.

Movement building agency

For the Black boys and young men I've worked with, the relationships that they cultivate within community-based organizations entrenched in social movement work ultimately lead to their continued engagement with social movement organizing. Through their peer-to-peer networks, young people are able to engage in learning exchanges, grow their socio-political identities, and most importantly, connect their peers and families who are not involved in social movement organizing to new movement-based networks. Through political education, which social movement scholars refer to as cognitive liberation and education scholars refer to as critical pedagogy (McAdam, 1999; Pulido, 2006), young people are able to politicize their peers, families, and communities to help build a base in the struggle for liberation in their communities. *For many young people, this is larger than just correcting forms of oppressive behavior that their peers may exhibit (such as cat-calling women on the streets or making comments rooted in anti-Black sentiment), movement building agency is about the intentional practice of growing their community's political consciousness so they can join struggles for liberation.*

The relationship between Marcus Pickens and LeQuan Muhammad from the Social Justice Learning Institute best illustrate movement building agency. As LeQuan was facing consistent school push-out, Marcus took notice, and recruited him to the Black Male Youth Academy program that SJLI operated at his old high school. As LeQuan became more involved, he began to understand how the school push-out he was experiencing was a direct result of the carceral state's entrenchment in Black communities, and in his own life. Through being recruited by Marcus, LeQuan was exposed to new ideas that led him to working on a ballot measure in the state of California called Prop 47, which turned nonviolent drug offenses from felonies to misdemeanors. Working on this campaign shortened the jail sentence of his own father, who was able to return home. Dr D'Artagnan Scorza, the executive director of the Social Justice Learning Institute at the time, also received the same call from his family members who were on their way home because of their advocacy. Through movement-building agency, social isolation is directly confronted by bringing newcomers into movement building through politicization and the cultivation of networks who are at least sympathetic, and at most deeply committed, to social change. This is pivotal for Black boys and young men, as they work to address the traumas they experience at the hands of the state.

Structurally transformative agency

Structurally transformative agency, which is distinct from movement building agency, *is a process in which Black boys and young men work collaboratively with their peers, adult allies, and others to confront the state and change some form of policy, practice, or cultural norm.* Structurally transformative agency, then, is rooted in what Sekou Franklin (2014) would define as transformational movements, being

diffuse and involve high-risk strategies and tactics that have a sustained impact on political culture; their goals are adopted by a diverse group of movement networks; occasionally, they influence the emergence of new mobilizing structures; and at times they disrupt or effect the implementation of public policies. (p. 17)

As Black boys and young men begin to embrace the identities of organizers or activists, they begin to see how social and political systems have directly impacted their lives, and what they need to do in order to transform it. The political imaginations of these young people, many of whom are deeply influenced by Black feminists and abolitionist politics, dream of worlds where police and prisons do not exist, Black communities have the resources that they need, and racial harmony is present only in the absence [and eradication] of white domination and power (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Through structurally transformative agency, Black young people took to the streets in the summer of 2020 to call for the defunding of police, the reimagination of public safety, and justifiably lit righteous fires to bring abolition into the national forefront as the primary public safety transformation strategy.

When Christian Wimberly performed his song, “Why We Need School Police?” at the rally to defund school police in June 2020 in Los Angeles, he reimagines school safety in the song and explicitly states, “matter of fact, abolishment, we know what time it is.” Not only did Wimberly perform, but he worked with his peers to provide testimony to the board on why school police need to be abolished. Black girls and femmes from the Black-led Students Deserve organized the rally, in which young people like Wimberly attended. Jacob Jackson, a youth leader with the Youth Justice Coalition, helped to lead the efforts of the Youth Justice Reimagined initiative — which is a 5-year plan to phase out youth probation and reinvest that funding into a county-wide youth development department that is rooted in social justice. Jackson and Jared O’Brien, 2 of the Youth Justice Coalition’s leaders, played key roles in other key justice movements in the state of California such as passing Assembly Bill 392, which created stricter guidelines for the use of force from law enforcement. Through their collective organizing, Black transformative agency works to radically shift the ability for state power to harm communities, and builds the capacity for Black boys and young men to both participate in, and lead, movements.

Implications for educators, policy makers, and practitioners

In a speech at The Martin Luther King Jr Freedom Center’s Barbara Lee and Elihu Harris Lecture series in Oakland, the late Congressman John Lewis gave a lecture about the need to “get in the way.” In his speech, Lewis recalled how his elders at the time knew the ways of Jim Crow, but out of the fear of white violence, there were no mass movements to address it. He was told how he needed to, “get out of the way” and “stay out of trouble.” As Lewis first began to learn about the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement from the Montgomery

Bus Boycott, he understood that, “getting in the way” was not only noble, it was indeed the only way that Black communities will ever see change. He proclaimed, “We have to get into Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble” in order to make things right — in order to change the status quo. Below I outline some recommendations for educational policy makers, practitioners, administrators, and students who do not mind a little good trouble:

- (1) **Get [out] the way and open the door (Policy Makers).** One thing that Oakes and Rogers (2006) outline is that technical reforms led exclusively by policy experts and bureaucrats are largely ineffective in transforming both the fundamental logics that undergird educational inequality and schooling conditions themselves. Organizers have been central to some of the most significant changes to educational policy that have improved outcomes for Black boys, like the passing of the School Climate Bill of Rights (SCBR) by the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition in the LAUSD in 2013. With the SCBR, willful defiance school suspensions ended, and both attendance and graduation increased in LAUSD as a direct result of not pushing students out. By trusting organizers and those most impacted by certain systems, one can make a significant impact.
- (2) **Get in the way (Community-based educators and teachers).** In Los Angeles, the second largest teachers’ union in the country, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), took a controversial stance in joining the Black Lives Matter movement’s demand to have police-free schools. Teachers from all across the union supported the Black student leaders who took to the streets to transform their schools and communities and reimagine school safety. Their position deeply influenced the decision to cut the school police budget. Community-based organizations like the Labor Community Strategy Center in LA have already worked to demilitarize the school police, and this movement built on this momentum. Organizations like LCSC operate, “Taking Action” clubs at local high schools to politicize young people, and these young people then drive the campaigns to facilitate change in their schools. It’s important to “get in the way,” and for community-based organizations and teachers to also fight against the status quo.
- (3) **Get into Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble (Educational administrators).** Many principals (most of them principals of color) that I’ve worked with pursued careers in education because they care, and because they understand the broader systemic inequities that schools facilitate. Administrators can play a key role in facilitating good trouble. Administrators can open the doors of the school to community-based organizations that work to organize students, teachers, and parents. Administrators can secure resources for programs that engage in social justice related work. While I was working with SJLI, I worked with a principal that paid for a bus for our class, so that way our students can engage in a youth participatory action research project and survey other students at continuation schools throughout the school district about their needs. That survey led to systemic changes at the district level to the relationships that continuation campuses had with their host campus. When administrators reject complacency and work with community members to change their schools, good things can happen.
- (4) **Get Into (Good) Trouble, Together (Youth Leaders).** Social movement scholars, youth resistance scholars, and the like would assert that young people have been a primary driver of, if not central to, social change (see Kwon, 2013; McAdam, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Given the centrality of young people and communities fighting to create shifts in public policy and educational practice,

the only recommendation for youth would be to get organized. For example, the Black Panther Party was primarily led Black youth ranging from the ages of 17–26, and their programs and political education laid the foundation for radical organizing for the next 50 years across the United States (see Bloom & Martin, 2013; Pulido, 2006). We organize together, we can accomplish things collectively that we cannot accomplish individually, so organizing each other and developing an agenda is central to the well-being of your communities. In Los Angeles, student activists like Kahlila Williams and Sarah Djoto from Students Deserve helped to build a massive coalition of students, parents, and youth to defund school police and invest in Black student achievement. Through their leadership and the support of some organizations, we were able to accomplish a major organizing victory collectively that we could not accomplished individually.

- (5) **Embrace (Good) Trouble (For Boys and Men of Color Practitioners).** As Dumas (2016) and Sojoyner (2016) identifies, when adults develop programs for Black boys and young men, can sometimes be rooted in frameworks of deficit, superpredator mythology, and individualist solutions such as telling teens to “pull their pants up” or “how to dress for success.” Black transformative agency, however, provides a framework for the ways that you can work with Black boys and young men in ways that provide them with the tools necessary to *challenge*, not just *adapt to*, oppressive conditions. For practitioners who work with this specific population, it’s critical to develop programs and interventions like Urban Scholars Program at the Social Justice Learning Institute, where youth are specifically trained to identify problems in their communities and build projects and campaigns to address them, rooted in participatory action research (see Scorza, 2013).

In Pedro Noguera’s (2003, 2009) “The Trouble with Black Boys,” both the book and the article, he outlines some of the ways that educational institutions, youth service providers, and others can work to improve the academic achievement of African American boys. As Noguera has highlighted elsewhere (see Noguera, 2007, 2014), and what I have hoped to demonstrate here, is that young people can, and should, be the driving force of the changes we hope to see, in and out of schools. Black boys are often on the receiving end of the prison-like nature of our schools — whether it’s through overpolicing, disproportionate rates of suspension, and contentious relationships with adults on campus. At many schools, Black boys are always, “in trouble.” However, what if this trouble brought about the divestment of 25 million dollars from school police, and reinvested that money into Black student achievement like Christian and the girls from Students Deserve? What if that trouble includes taking over the office of the speaker of the house in the California legislature, so that way law enforcement can think twice about pulling the trigger like Jacob and Jared did? What if the trouble that Black boys get into is the “good trouble” that John Lewis spoke of, that necessary trouble to change their schools and communities? As stated in this article, Black youth make meaning of their own agency and organizing through a process I name as Black Transformative Agency, which I define as a multi-axis process for the ways that Black boys and young men exhibit individual and collective agency that they learn in their programs to both combat social isolation and challenge institutional actors, hegemony, and power. Maybe if we as adults moved out the way and created those opportunities, then the good trouble our Black youth could get into may actually transform schools and society.

Disclosure statement

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Additional resources

1. **City Rising - Youth And Democracy (Aired October 20, 2020).** <https://www.pbs.org/video/city-rising-youth-democracy-xkjbp5/>

This resource focuses on the importance of youth organizing, and how young people use organizing as a tool to build self confidence and fight against their own dispossession. The documentary chronicles youth organizers in different areas across California, including Los Angeles.

2. **Campaign for Black Male Achievement and Candid - Legacy Database** https://bma.issuelab.org/?coverage=&author=&funder=&publisher=&wikitopic_categories=&keywords=&pubdate_start_year=1&pubdate_end_year=1&sort=&categories=

This database chronicles over 250 reports about programs, interventions, and projects connected to Black male achievement. The database includes projects and articles both before and after the launch of Barack Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative.

3. Carey, R. L., Akiva, T., Abdellatif, H., & Daughtry, K. A. (2020). “And school won’t teach me that!” Urban youth activism programs as transformative sites for critical adolescent learning. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23 1–20.

In this article, Carey et al. (2020) highlights the impact of social justice youth development on young people, and the critical skills they learn in youth activist spaces. Drawing upon an analysis of six different youth activist spaces, the authors highlight the growth of self, social, and global awareness, in addition to the development of technical skills such as using technology or conducting research.