



Teaching Black Boys in Early Childhood Education: Promising Practices from Exemplar Teachers

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The purpose of this study was to identify promising teaching and learning practices employed by educators with a proven record of success in serving Black boys. In particular, this research focused on educators who had success in the early childhood education context. Narratives were elicited from 48 teachers in California who were nominated by their principals for participation in this study. Five primary strategies were recurrent among educators with a demonstrated record of success in teaching Black boys. These strategies included: a) culturally relevant teaching; b) kinesthetic-based instruction; c) oral intelligence-based instruction; d) small group learning; and e) healthy competition. Implications for future research are extended.

Keywords: Promising Practices, Early Childhood Education, Black Boys, Multicultural Pedagogy

In 1984, Jawanza Kunjufu penned the landmark book, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. In this book, he critiqued educators for their perpetuation of systems and practices that reified oppression of Black communities, particularly Black boys. He decried the numerous inadequacies of the American educational system, arguing that educators who continued practices that led to poor outcomes for Black males were participants in a conspiracy to destroy them. While there are now numerous programs, interventions, conferences, symposia, books, and journals dedicated to exploring challenges facing Black males (Harper, 2010a), little movement has been seen in the relative performance of Black boys in comparison to their peers.

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Rather than explicate the numerous data points that illustrate this historical and contemporary concern or elucidate the confluence of challenges that enable inequities to exist, this study sought to contribute to the extant literature base in a different manner. Specifically, this research focused on strategies and practices that have promise for improving the lives and conditions of Black males. As a result, the purpose of this study was to identify promising teaching and learning practices employed by educators with a proven record of success in serving Black boys in education. In particular, this research focused on educators who had success in teaching Black boys in early childhood education. I investigated practices in the early childhood education context given that Black males success in early learning is an area that is largely under examined by scholars, yet influences their success throughout the educational pipeline.

This study is also critical given that prior research on promising and best practices for serving Black boys has overwhelmingly focused on relational dynamics between teachers and students. In fact, investigations into these dynamics have overshadowed the need to investigate sound multicultural pedagogical strategies that may be fruitful for success. This is not to underemphasize the importance of relationships that are typified by trust, mutual respect, and authentic care. Indeed, numerous scholars have demonstrated that positive and affirming relationships are critical to success for Black boys (Harper & Wood, 2016; Howard, 2000, 2001, 2013; Polite & Davis, 1999; Wood & Harris III, 2016). In particular, this is due to the pervasive perspectives of Black males as troubled, uncaring, deviant, and academically inferior (Howard, Douglas, & Warren, 2016; Howard, Flenbaugh & Terry, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Notwithstanding, there is also a need to understand direct instructional practices that can benefit Black males. Of course, the importance of unearthing these practices may be even more critical in early childhood education where students' perceptions of schooling, learning habits, and long-term educational trajectories are being shaped (Johns, 2016). Bearing this in mind, the next section will briefly overview the research literature on teaching and learning strategies for Black boys.

Brief Review of Literature

This review begins with one of the few published articles on teaching practices for Black boys in early childhood education. In 2016, Wright and Ford extended a model of culturally relevant teaching for Black boys in early learning that gleaned from extant research on these males across the educational pipeline. They stated that a culturally relevant curriculum “reflects, represents, and celebrates a vision for social change in America forged historically by all Americans, with a particular emphasis on African Americans” (p. 12). To enact this curriculum, Wright and Ford offered four strategies to help educators emphasize Black male realities and experiences in the classroom.

First, they suggested that history be taught from a ‘history and me’ perspective, where class readings focus on Black history as well as Black male contributions within history. In doing so, they argued that readings that challenged stereotypical perceptions of Black males and presented healthy perspectives of them were essential. Second, they suggested that a similar approach be taken to address contemporary topics. Specifically, they noted that Black males should be exposed to ‘mirror books’ that mirror their lives and experiences, as opposed to ‘window books’ which provide them with a window into a White reality. Third, they suggested that educators employ a curriculum that inculcates belonging and affirmation through the use of active engagement that stimulates learners kinesthetically and visually. Lastly, the development of a boy’s empowerment club was also extended as a learning strategy that could be employed during non-school time (e.g.,

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recess, lunch) to engage role models, explore topics that extend beyond the school curriculum, and to provide opportunities for additional active engagement.

The recommendations encapsulated within this framework are largely representative of the research on instructional strategies for Black boys. In particular, many scholars have explored the benefits of culturally relevant teaching and learning practices for Black boys (Howard, 2000, 2001, 2013; Howard et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). For example, Alfred Tatum (2005, 2006) has written extensively about the need to employ culturally relevant texts to support the literacy development of Black males. Similar to the notion of ‘mirror books’, Tatum (2006) argued that Black males should be exposed to readings which are relevant to their lives and experiences in all areas (e.g., school, home, culture, affective disposition, social interactions). Specifically, he stated that educators should employ texts with Black male characters, that discuss issues relevant to the lives of Black boys, and that ‘legitimize’ their experiences. He also noted that nonfiction books are needed to enable Black boys to learn new concepts and content that are applicable to their interests and experiences.

Similar to Wright and Ford’s (2016) notion of a boy’s empowerment club, Emdin (2012) in his work on reality pedagogy has offered a similar approach referred to as cogenerative dialogues. The dialogues also take place during non-instructional time and provide opportunities for Black males to engage in discourse and explore topics that address their socio-cultural realities in- and out-of school contexts. Dialogues occur in small groups and are guided by teachers. A key component of this concept is the notion that the dialogue must yield some action. Specifically, issues addressed within the dialogue must produce action plans to engage the concerns and opportunities raised.

Beyond these synergistic points, research from Howard (2000) has also emphasized the importance of explicitly confronting racism and stereotypes that emerge in class discussion. Moreover, he also extolled the importance of structuring classroom dialogue to be attentive to the communication patterns of Black communities. He stated that educators should restructure their use and conceptualization of appropriate modes of communication to honor the dialogues, conversation styles, phraseology, argot, and relational exchanges of Black students. He argued that culturally-based communications styles that are characteristic to Black communities are typically not honored or valued in school settings, negatively affecting the treatment and perceptions of Black boys and young men. In addition to the prior literature on teaching Black boys, I will now overview a study that served as the theoretical framework and methodological inspiration for this current study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this study was based on Wood and Harris III (2016) research on effective strategies for teaching boys and young men of color. This is inclusive of their *four primary intelligences* and *eight teaching and learning strategies* for teaching boys and young men of color. In brief, their research elicited narratives from k-12 teachers with an evidence-based track record of teaching boys and young men of color, with a specific focus on Black and Latino males. In their study, a total of 216 exemplar teachers nominated by principals and school heads from six states (e.g., California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, New York, and Texas) contributed narratives. Wood and Harris III discussed four intelligences (asset areas) that are often domains of strength for boys and young men of color. Informed by Gardner’s (1995) articulation of multiple intelligences, they argued that boys and young men of color exemplified

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strengths in visual-spatial intelligence, musical-rhythmic intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, and linguistic-oral intelligence. These intelligences were proffered as areas where educators could leverage the cultural and socialized strengths that are often evident among boys of color but infrequently maximized by educators.

In addition to these four areas, educators in their study also described eight teaching and learning strategies for boys and young men of color. Wood and Harris III identified the following strategies: a) culturally relevant content – connecting the curriculum to the lived socio-cultural realities and experiences of students; b) addressing racism and stereotypes – intentionally confronting and deconstructing messages that perpetuate racism, stereotypes, and misnomers about boys and young men of color; c) mastery learning principles – ensuring that course content is acquired prior to engaging new content; d) fostering critical reflection - providing learning and development activities that engage students in reflection and introspection into their actions, mores, and assumptions; e) cooperative and collaborative learning- using guided learning in small group settings to engage learning and to explore the nuances of course content; f) engaging problem (project)-based learning – engaging inquiry-based learning modalities that allow students to problem solve and learn through guided or independent investigation; g) healthy competition-increasing student interest in course learning through competitive activities that engage socialized competitive ethos among boys and young men; and h) leadership opportunities – that re-center males of color as leaders in-class and out-of-class learning opportunities.

While Wood and Harris's III research provided an essential framework for guiding this current study. There are two primary distinctions between their work and this current study. First, their research was not attentive to learning strategies that may differ between Black and Latino boys. In essence, they conflated these two groups, potentially overshadowing unique and distinctive attributes of these students. While both groups represent males of color (broadly defined), there may be ethno-cultural factors that are specific to teaching and learning strategies that can benefit Black boys. In addition, while their research focused on teaching practices in K-12, this current research is specific to early childhood education. This is essential, as teaching strategies that may be more beneficial in latter grade levels may not be as necessary or relevant in the early childhood context. Moreover, even in cases where principles of practice may span K-12, the manner in which these principles are enacted in early learning settings may differ in nature, function, and purpose. Guided by the aforementioned framework and extant works on teaching practices, the researcher will discuss the methods employed in this narrative research study.

Methods

This study employs data collected from narratives derived from teachers with a demonstrated record of success in teaching Black boys in early childhood education. I contacted school heads and principals from all public preschools and elementary schools in the state of California. These school leaders were asked to identify exemplar teachers of Black boys and to nominate these teachers for participation in this study. The principals were asked to recommend early childhood teachers in preschool through third grade who have been teaching in the classroom for at least four years. Specifically, the principals were informed that the recommended teachers must have a demonstrated record of success in teaching Black boys, based on measurable outcomes employed by the school.

To target maximum variation within the sample, the principals were permitted to use local-level criteria for measures of success. This strategy was employed to allow for a wide array of

promising practices to emerge (Merriam, 1998). It should be noted that a sizeable contingent of principals noted that they supported the purpose of the study but simply did not have teachers who they believed (based on measurable outcomes) demonstrated efficacy in teaching Black boys. Teachers who were nominated for participation were directed to reflect upon their teaching practices and other key strategies (e.g., classroom management, curriculum development, assessment of learning, relationship-building, facilitating socio-emotional development) that they found to be successful in educating this population. Educators provided narratives discussing these practices and addressing their rationales for why these practices were necessary for supporting the learning, development, and success of Black boys.

A total of 48 teachers participated in the study. Of the sample, 77.8% of the teachers identified as women while 22.2% indicated that they were men. Of the exemplar teachers, the percentage breakdown by racial/ethnic affiliation was as follows: White (44.4%), African American/Black (22.2%), Asian American/Pacific Islander (5.6%), Chicano/Latino (16.7%), and Multiethnic (11.1%). Given that teaching across levels is common in the field of early childhood, teachers were asked to indicate the primary grades in which they teach. The teachers were representative of all levels of early childhood education, spanning from preschool to third grade. This included the following: preschool (27.8%), transitional preschool-kindergarten (11.1%), kindergarten (38.9%), first grade (27.8%), second grade (33.3%), and third grade (33.3%).

Analytic Technique

All narratives were coded using a modified grounded theory technique espoused by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). This technique, referred to as an ‘ideas grouping approach’, is an inductive analytic frame where recurrent ideas are refined into more advanced conceptual groupings for the purpose of theory generation. One primary benefit of this analytic technique, is that it allows for the employment of theoretical frameworks in the coding process. Using this approach, I reviewed each narrative to create an initial list of statements and ideas that were recurrent across participants. Then, using a constant-comparison approach, I interrogated the recurrent ideas in comparison to the data to refine and modify themes by grouping them together and linking them conceptually. Conceptual linkages included depicting directional and bi-directional relationships as discussed by the exemplar teachers. As part of this process, I expanded on some ideas, reduced others, and eliminated notions that were not recurrent within the narratives.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the emergent themes, intercoder reliability and bracketing were employed. Intercoder reliability included the assistance of another researcher who also coded a portion of the narratives. An iterative process of reviewing narratives and comparing coding results from both coders were employed until a high degree of congruency was obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, I also engaged in bracketing by documenting preconceived assumptions to better understand these notions and restrict their influence on the coding process (Ahern, 1999).

Findings

The final model presented in this study is depicted in Figure 1. This empirical model of early learning instruction for Black males is comprised on three domains of factors, including preconditions, teaching and learning strategies, and planned outcomes. Within the teaching and

learning domain, this article will focus intently on the teaching strategies factor. However, prior to explicating the intricacies of this factor, I provide a brief overview of the full model.

Preconditions

Exemplar teachers noted that there were two different types of factors that served as preconditions to effective teaching and learning strategies for boys of color. These preconditions included epistemological viewpoints as well as physiological and safety needs. Epistemological viewpoints refer to perspectives of Black boys that are necessary for supporting and interacting with them in positive and meaningful ways. As espoused by the exemplar teachers, these viewpoints encompassed anti-racist and anti-deficit perspectives. Anti-racist perspectives acknowledged pervasively racist perspectives of learners of color and consciously rejected these viewpoints while also engaging in actions that confronted people and systems that extend these notions (see Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2003).

Exemplar teachers also extolled the importance of anti-deficit perspectives that counter stereotypical views of Black boys that blame these children, their families, and communities for disparate outcomes in education (Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012). As noted by Harper (2010b), anti-deficit reframing rejects pathologies of Black boys and instead requires educators to view them from asset-based perspectives that esteem them (e.g., cognitive abilities, motivational drive), their families (e.g., nurturance, sustenance), and readiness for schooling among other factors. In accordance with this concept, perspectives that positively viewed the inherent cognitive abilities, moral operations, and cultural assets of Black boys were prioritized by exemplar teachers. These perspectives were viewed as being foundational to effectively engaging these children and their families.

Also emphasized was the importance of ensuring that children's physiological and safety needs were met. As described by Maslow (1943), physiological needs are core conditions that are necessary for survival. Ultimately, if these needs are not met, the individual is unable to function at their normal capacity. In general, food, water, and shelter are primary examples of these needs. In an educational setting, adequate supply of these physiological needs includes the sufficient supply and ingestion of healthy foods, adequate sleep, as well as a stable place of living. In like manner, exemplar teachers emphasized that all children (including Black boys) needed to be provided with healthy meals in- and out-of school and to have sufficient sleep to support positive interactions and attentional focus in class.

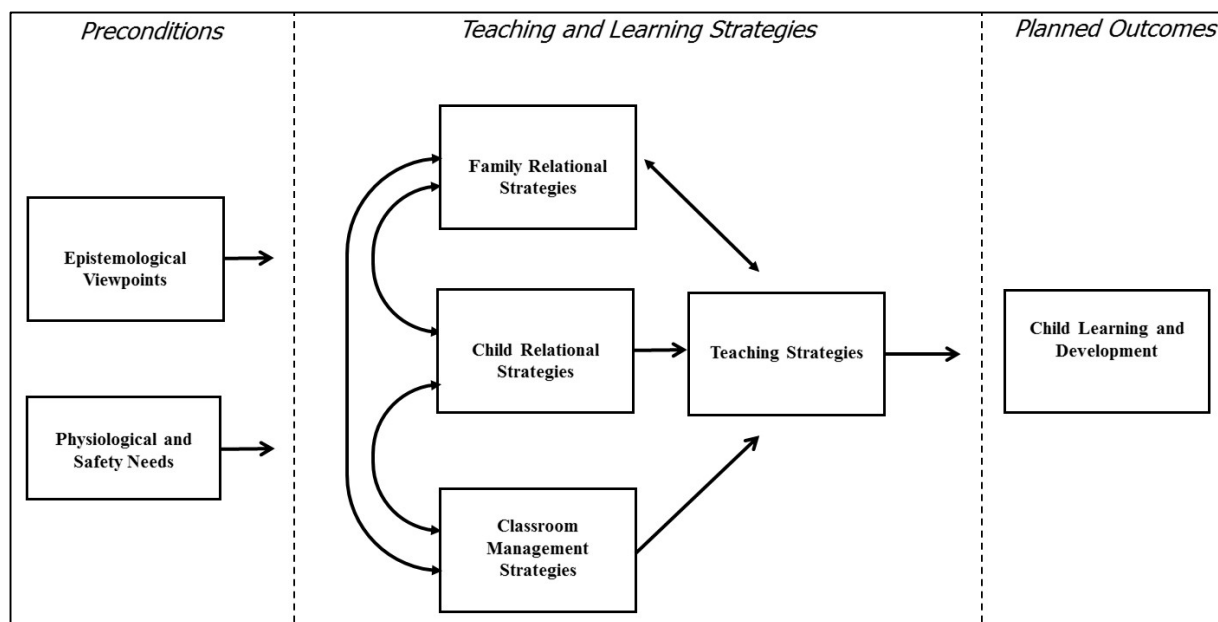


Figure 1. Essien's (2016) Model of Early Learning Instruction for Black Males

Teaching and Learning Strategies

Teachers in this study identified a litany of strategies for supporting the learning, development, and success of Black boys. Interestingly, many of the factors (three of four) that emerged as salient themes did not focus on direct instructional practices but alluded to a multitude of converging relational and classroom management techniques. These three factors included family relational strategies, child relational strategies, and classroom management strategies. As depicted in the model, the preconditions (e.g., epistemological viewpoints, physiological and safety needs) influenced the three teaching and learning factors. In turn, the three-forementioned teaching and learning strategies have bidirectional relationships on the other factors and had a direct influence on direct teaching strategies. Overall, the confluence of the four-total teaching and learning strategies influenced the planned outcomes of child learning and development.

Familial relational strategies discussed by exemplar teachers referred to open dialogue and consistent communication between the teacher and the families of the focal child. These relationships were intended to support understanding of childrens' lived socio-cultural realities, alignment between school and home-based instruction, as well as conditions for effective learning (e.g., healthy food, sufficient sleep). Child relational strategies were intended to build trust, establish respect, and convey authentic care (see Wood & Harris III, 2016). Examples of these strategies included being approachable with children, using validating practices to affirm their effort and abilities, being fully present during interactions with them, and learning about them with interest. Indeed, relationships have been repeatedly espoused in the research literature as a critical precondition to any effective teaching and learning enterprise for boys and men of color, particularly Black males (Howard, 2013; Howard et al., 2016; Polite & Davis, 1999; Wood & Harris III, 2016). This is as a result of the influence of relationships in serving as mediating factors against challenging external life pressures, racial and gender stereotypes, underexposure to effective preparation experiences, and male-gender role socialization (Wood, Harris III, & White, 2015).

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A number of classroom management strategies also emerged in this study. These strategies were influenced by anti-deficit viewpoints that recharacterized Black boys as moral beings rather than embracing immoral or amoral characterizations of these boys as being troublesome, up-to-no-good, or deviant (Wood & Hilton, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2011) noted that Black boys are perceived and engaged by educators through the lens of fear and control. Overwhelmingly, these boys are viewed from a criminalized perspective that assumes that they are delinquents and threats. As a result, educators respond to them by attempting to control their behaviors and movement in school settings. In essence, perceiving that restricting their engagements will produced desired behaviors. Her research demonstrates that the assumption of criminality tied to these boys is erroneous and a function of ubiquitous stereotypes of Black males. Exemplar teachers noted that Black boys must be engaged using fair disciplinary practices by educators who do not over ascribed malintent to their actions and disproportionately punish them in comparison to their peers. Moreover, educators recommended engaging these boys using non-confrontational tones, using positive reinforcements, and maintaining consistent standards for behavior.

Teaching Practices

As noted, this study was primarily interested in explicating the nuances of teaching strategies identified by exemplar teachers. An expansive range of strategies were identified including: scaffolding information, differentiated instruction, personalized instruction, inquiry-based learning, and abbreviated lessons. However, five primary strategies were recurrent among educators with a demonstrated record of success in teaching Black boys. These strategies included: a) culturally relevant teaching; b) kinesthetic-based instruction; c) oral intelligence-based instruction; d) small group learning; and e) healthy competition. As will be demonstrated in the following description of these strategies, there was overlap in the employment of these strategies by exemplar educators.

Table 1.

Promising teaching practices for Black boys in early childhood education

Concept	Description by Exemplars
Culturally relevant teaching	Leveraging knowledge of students' socio-cultural experiences to convey subject matter in a manner that is intrinsically stimulating.
Kinesthetic-Based Instruction	Strategies and activities that physically engage students as participants in the learning experience.
Oral Intelligence-Based Learning	Teaches course material in a manner that activates the oral intelligences of children of color.
Small group learning	Using small groups as a strategy for engaging students in cooperative and collaborative learning.
Healthy competition	Fostering healthy competition among learners to increasing their intrinsic interest in classroom learning.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally relevant teaching was espoused by educators as a key strategy for teaching Black boys. As described by the exemplar teachers, culturally relevant teaching referred to leveraging

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knowledge of students' socio-cultural experiences to convey subject matter in a manner that is intrinsically stimulating. Educators emphasized the need to embrace an understanding of the lived socio-cultural experiences of Black boys that transcends the surface-level. Guided by this notion, one educator stated "I think the short of it is, especially as a White woman, I have to do all I can to understand culture, languages etc., I also teach with the concept of empowerment through knowledge. I try to incorporate this into all I do". Similarly, another teacher responded "understand the culture. It is very important to understand the culture of the child, it takes really getting to know the student on a deeper level".

Beyond these experiences, advanced insight into students' strengths, multiple intelligences, mores, traditions, and common modes of learning were also emphasized. With respect to the latter, exemplars indicated that African American communities often teach Black children through home-based learning that employs modeling. They suggested that educators be attentive to this cultural pattern of knowledge transmission in the classroom. For example, one exemplar stated the following:

Black boys are very curious and want to relate their learning to their own experiences. I have also found that Black boys are methodical. They need all of the details for learning when first introduced to a process or a new structure. I believe that the way that Black boys learn and interact are a direct result of cultural and family values. For instance, most Black families teach their children by doing and showing. When children are taught to make a bed or tie their shoes, most Black parents perform the tasks with their child various times giving them very descriptive narration of how it's done. Once the child has been given ample time of guided practice, the expectation is that they will be able to perform the actions on their own.

Culturally relevant teaching was perceived as a contributor to success for Black boys. Specifically, educators conveyed that doing so served to bridge cultural divides between teachers and children. This understanding was also seen as a staging ground for educators to leverage the assets that students brought with them into the classroom. Educators emphasized the need to integrate cultural relevance in all aspects of their classes, including the teaching styles, curricular materials, and examples provided to learners. For instance, one educator commented on the importance of using reading materials that repositioned males of color as central characters, stating "I try to use books and stories that my students can identify with. There are very limited examples of stories where young men of color are the main and strong character – so I believe using these books is important". Clearly, there are direct connections between this recommendation and the Tatum's (2005, 2006) work on literacy development for Black boys.

Kinesthetic-Based Instruction

Kinesthetic-based instruction was also extended by exemplar educators as an effective tool for teaching Black boys. This approach refers to strategies and activities that physically engage students as participants in the learning experience. This practice was extolled as being reflective of male gender socialization patterns, where boys are given toys that emphasize spatial manipulation, physical engagement, and shorter periods of attentional focus (Cherney & London, 2006). As a result, boys are subsequently trained to process information and engage in ways that are reflective of this socialization. Given this, educators emphasized the importance of movement

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in the classroom and provided different strategies for doing so such as games, activities, and role playing. In explaining this notion, one educator stated:

Boys as a category instinctively, find that playing to learn is in their DNA. Trucks, blocks, Legos, super heroes, games of action, running games, dancing, riding bikes, science items that attract the eye, promote physical action and inquisitiveness...boys like to show off, be expressive, loud, and cannot sit still for any long period of time. That is why you as a teacher must employ strategies that include body movement with any lesson or learning area.

Overwhelmingly, exemplar teachers stated that boys learn best and thrive when they are actively engaged. This is due to the fact that some boys tend to have a greater need to expel energy. For example, educators stated “too much sitting and listening, students need to be active and moving as they learn, also they need to be verbal” and “I have a lot of movement in my classroom. All kids benefit from stretching to focus and my experience shows me that boys benefit from having a chance to energize and wiggle”. In addition to extolling the benefits of movement, educators also decried the sedentary teaching style often employed in education. For instance, one educator commented:

I have found that Black boys are very energetic by nature and tend to learn better when kinesthetic teaching is employed...I also believe that a lot of early learning at home is rhythmic and social which definitely plays a big role for Black boys being kinesthetic learners...I feel like the traditional “sit down” and “be quiet” teaching hinders Black boys.

Educators noted that sedentary learning was detrimental to boys in general. Moreover, sedentary teaching styles were perceived as being particularly harmful for Black boys whose actions are often interpreted differently by educators. This is as a result of pervasive criminalized views of Black boys and men in society where their actions are often misinterpreted as being nefarious, devious, mischievous, and excessively aggressive (Howard, 2001, 2013).

Beyond the need to expend energies and avoidance of teaching strategies that may result in differential perceptions of the actions of Black boys, teachers also emphasized that kinesthetic learning is also a more effective manner of transmitting knowledge to children. Specifically, educators noted that boys tend to process information better when movement is occurring. Exemplars stated that kinesthetic instruction allows for the teaching of additional learning content, primary around good citizenship. For instance, one teacher noted “When we are moving, we are learning! I love to find games and activities that gets us out of our seats! Boys seem to really enjoy having the opportunity to get up and move. This is one of my favorite times to look for those “teachable moments”. I use this time to teach about teamwork, manners, and how to settle an argument”.

Oral Intelligence-Based Learning

Oral intelligence based learning was also highlighted by exemplar teachers. This type of instruction teaches course material in a manner that activates the oral intelligences (or assets) of children of color. As noted by Wood and Harris III (2016), this type of instruction differs from general linguistic intelligence which refers widely to verbal, written, and reading assets of children

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to focus specifically on modes of oral communication. While this notion intersects with the concept of rhythmic intelligence, the focus here is on the oral assets associated with communicating in this manner. As such, oral intelligence is inclusive of a wide array of communication areas, including speech patterns, rhyme, sounds, and song.

Educators noted that Black boys often have strengths in these areas that can be leveraged by educators to support their teaching and learning. Moreover, they noted that these modes of communication were rooted in Afro-cultural oral traditions that emphasize a “strong preference for oral modes of communication: students speak frankly, directly, and honestly; students enjoy playing with language (puns, jokes, innuendoes, storytelling, etc.)” (Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2001, p. 54).

In this line of thought, educators emphasized the importance of leveraging oral intelligence as a cultural asset of Black boys. For instance, one educator stated: “Song or music. Music is such an integral part of African American culture, it is all around us. Music and song help to aid memory and it makes learning fun and accessible. It is a great way to teach unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts”. Adhering to this perspective, another educator commented “learning opportunities that incorporate oral language/storytelling. It is part of their culture”. Many educators talked about the importance of having activities that included songs, rhymes, and chants. They also noted that Black boys tended to communicate their learning better orally. While these examples could certainly be conceptualized as relating to musical-rhythmic intelligence, the manner in which they were discussed by exemplars focused on the oral assets being leveraged.

One strategy for maximizing the natural oral-intelligence of Black boys was the use of call and response. A number of educators emphasized the importance of using this practice in the classroom. Call and response is an African American communication pattern where one individual makes a statement (referred to as the ‘call’) and others reply to that statement in unison (known as the ‘response’). This style of communication is particularly evident in Black churches where a pastor makes a statement (e.g., God is good) that is responded to by the church body (e.g., all the time). Similarly, teachers noted using this mode of communication may be familiar to some Black boys. One educator noted “I use a lot of call and response. Kids are encouraged to join in. As with all good teaching moves, this is good for all of my kids, but it resonates with kids of color for whom this mode might be familiar from home and church”.

Small Group Learning

Small group and dyad learning emerged as a recurrent theme in the analysis. As conveyed by the exemplar educators, this referred to using small groups as a strategy for engaging students in cooperative and collaborative learning. Cooperative and collaborative learning are strategies for engaging students in small group learning with varying degrees of teacher guidance and fluidity. While cooperative learning tends to emphasize greater direction from the teacher and to be more task-specific and focused, collaborative learning is more fluid, open-ended, and learner driven (Rockwood, 1995). While teachers employed both terms, the descriptions seemed to emphasize principles of cooperative learning (which is also more developmentally appropriate for young children).

While educators did not regularly specify the group size, emphasis was placed on having groups that were small enough to provide students with a safe space for engaging and learning from one another. Numerous benefits of this practice were extolled by educators, among the most

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recurrently mentioned by exemplar educators. Among the most salient benefits was building student confidence in their academic abilities. One educator stated:

Group or Partner Assignments or Projects - Children teaching children... What can be better than that? I am amazed all of the time when I catch one child helping another with a problem or a concept. Not only do children understand other children better, but it really boosts the self-confidence in the child when they are the ones to get to help someone else. I love to walk around and listen to conversations.

This notion is in alignment with prior research from Wood and Harris III (2016), who found that exemplar teachers of Black and Latino males favored small group learning which provided opportunities for children to teach one another. This was perceived as a strategy for building self-confidence as well as fostering positive self-esteem among children. They also noted that the environment created in small groups better fostered learning because students were able to speak more freely to one another.

Moreover, this practice was discussed as a strategy for better learning about students, their learning, needs, and assets. For instance, one educator stated “Small Group Instruction - This allows me to really get to know my students and figure out what motivates them! It also keeps their attention and makes them feel safe. I teach in small groups as often as I can!”. Similar to this notion, other educators also noted that this practice can create an environment where students feel more comfortable engaging, asking questions, and learning from one another.

Healthy Competition

A number of exemplar educators also were attentive to the role that male gender-role socialization had on students’ learning and development. As a result, they suggested fostering healthy competition as an effective strategy for engaging Black boys. According to these exemplars, fostering healthy competition among boys served as a mechanism for increasing Black males’ intrinsic interest in classroom learning. These educators argued that boys are socialized to embrace competition, where they thrive when engaged in competition with one another.

Indeed, much has been written in the scholarly literature about this concept, referred to as competitive ethos. Specifically, Harris III and Harper (2008) noted that boys are socialized by male figures to internalize competition and other concepts (e.g., independence, control) as a value. Success in competitive endeavors serves to denote status within male-centric hierarchies. While the domain for this competition often occurs out-of-classroom in athletics and martial arts, the educators in this study perceived that healthy competition should be a facet of the classroom domain as well. In essence, exemplar educators argued that this competitive ethos that is shared by some boys can be leveraged as an asset to bolster their engagement and focus in school.

Most commonly, educators enabled students to express their competitive ethos in the classroom context through learning games, review games, and activities that were grounded in the subject matter. For instance, one educator noted “I also play review games that allow for competition. Boys love to compete and are willing to stay engaged when they know their team must win”. In like manner, another educator stated “I am always talking about the boys and how great we are. I set up competitive situations in my daily classroom instruction. Boys, I believe love competition...I also have regular weekly activities such as game hour”. Of course, emphasis

was placed on ensuring that the competition was well managed and fostered healthy outcomes such as teamwork, good citizenship, and (most importantly) learning.

Discussion and Implications for Research

In sum, five primary teaching and learning strategies were extended by exemplar educators as promising practices for teaching Black boys in early childhood education. These practices included: culturally relevant teaching, kinesthetic-based instruction, oral intelligence-based learning, small group learning, and healthy competition. These categories of practice resonated with the *eight teaching and learning* practices and *four primary intelligences* offered by Wood and Harris III (2016) for teaching Black and Latino boys. However, as noted earlier, this study extended upon their work by being attentive to the unique experiences of Black boys and to the early childhood context.

All the aforementioned areas of practice emerged in this study, though this research characterized their notion of cooperative and collaborative learning as a small group learning practice. However, there were a number of teaching and learning themes evident in their research which were not recurrent here, including addressing racism and stereotypes, mastery learning principles, fostering critical reflection, problem (project) based learning, and leadership opportunities. These may be areas that are not developmentally appropriate or as emphasized in early learning settings. Moreover, while this study illuminated the benefit of kinesthetic-based instruction and oral intelligence-based learning, their emphasis on leveraging the assets of visual-spatial intelligences were not recurrent in this study.

Largely, the themes identified in this study also resonated with prior research, particularly the concept of culturally relevant teaching. As noted, culturally relevant teaching has emerged as a critical teaching and learning practice in research on Black males in education (Howard, 2011; Emdin, 2012, Wright & Ford, 2016). Moreover, as with prior research from Tatum (2005, 2006) who articulated the importance of literacy tools that are relevant to the racial and gendered experiences of boys of color, exemplar teachers also noted the benefit of this practice.

In addition, the concept of kinesthetic based-instruction was also perceived by exemplar educators as being essential for Black male success. While Wright and Ford (2016) did not place extensive emphasis on this concept, they did note that educators must inculcate an environment of belonging that stimulates learners kinesthetically. Clearer connections with these themes are present in the frameworks articulated by Wood and Harris III (2016). This study's findings around oral intelligence-based instruction also aligned with Howard's (2000) recommendations. As previously noted, Howard argued that educators should honor the modes of communication that are shared by some Black males, including their discourse patterns, lingo, and relational exchanges. In particular, he suggested that doing so would honor the oral-linguistic traditions of Black communities. Similarly, this study also found that oral intelligence-based instruction was perceived by exemplar teachers as being necessary for restructuring the classroom environments to embrace the assets of Black male learners.

With respect to small group learning and healthy competition, these concepts were not as well defined in the extant literature on Black males, though they were part of Wood and Harris III (2016) eight teaching and learning strategies. The closest connection to extant literature related to small group learning. While small group learning was emphasized more as an out-of-class strategy by other scholars (i.e., Emdin's (2012) cogenerative dialogues, Wright and Ford's (2016) boy's

empowerment club), this study focused more on the benefit of this practice in class. Thus, the groups described were categorically different in nature and function.

Given that this study focused on promising practices, recommendations for future research are presented. Future studies should continue to explore strategies and practices that can improve outcomes for Black boys in early childhood education. While this area touched upon a broad array of teaching practices, future studies should delve further into each respective area identified (e.g., culturally relevant teaching, kinesthetic-based instruction, oral intelligence-based learning, small group learning, healthy competition) to provide more insight into tangible strategies that educators can use. For instance, in articulating the benefit of kinesthetic learning, educators noted that the need to incorporate games, activities, and role playing into the classroom.

However, further research could investigate different models for engaging this concept and provide more clear insight on how to use these practices. Moreover, while this study was delimited to teachers in California, there may be a need to further explore practices employed by teachers in other states. In particular, states with high concentrations of Black communities (e.g., Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina) would be apt sites to extend this research. Another approach would be to replicate this study in schools where success rates are high and approach an understanding of practices through a case study framework. This would allow for better insight into structural conditions and meta-curricular decisions that influence success for Black boys.

Limitations

Like all research, this study was not without limitations. For instance, this study employed a maximum variation technique as it related to documented areas of excellence. Thus, teachers included in this study represented a wide spectrum of observable measures of success. However, the benefit of this approach was also adjoined with the drawback of not having a more standardized measure to determine exemplar status. As such, future studies can also be more restrictive and employ a more singular definition to determine a track record of success. Possibly, this may produce more specific insights in certain areas. For instance, using a common measure of success in reading or mathematics may provide distinctive insights into pedagogical practices and into disciplinary specific approaches to instruction.

In all, this study set out to explore strategies and practices that have promise for improving outcomes for boys of color. Given the ubiquitous challenges facing these boys in early childhood education and throughout the educational pipeline (Kunjufu, 1984; Howard, 2013), it is essential that educators become familiar with these practices. The strategies and practices articulated in this study demonstrate areas of practice that should be emphasized in teacher credentialing, lifetime learning, and professional development for early childhood educators.

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