

A Place of Belonging: Unearthing How Black Boys Create Place Through Mentoring

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Schools have hindered Black boys' academic and emotional progress by adultifying and dehumanizing them. This paper employs a qualitative reflexivity method as a research tool. I reflect on my time as a school administrator of a K-8th-grade school in Philadelphia to analyze how a mentorship program called KingZ on the RiZe created a safe, affirming, and trauma-healing space for middle school Black boys. This paper utilizes Black Placemaking and Barry Lopez's *The Literature of Place* to examine how KingZ on the RiZe established a sense of belonging for Black boys, leading to academic and emotional growth and development.

Keywords: Black boys, middle school, Black placemaking, academic growth, emotional development

Introduction

As the school administrator of a K-8 school, I carried the burden of de-escalating any behaviors that violated school policy. My job felt more reactive than proactive. I was spending too much time and resources defusing student and teacher-student conflicts. At the end of my first semester, I analyzed student data, which included suspensions, detention, attendance, and academic performance, to learn that Black boys between the ages of 10 and 12 accounted for 48% of all behavior infractions. The numbers didn't surprise me. Staff and society constantly reinforced the notion that Black boys are difficult to control. In the spring of 2023, the Mayor's Office of Black Male Engagement released a report titled "The State of Black Men and Boys in Philadelphia." Below are some of the statistics that were revealed in the report, as follows:

- 25% of Black male students in the School District of Philadelphia have an IEP
- 13% of black men hold a bachelor's degree
- Black men experience the lowest life expectancy and the highest death rate
- Black males aged 15-19 die at a rate 2.5 times higher than their white counterparts

The wellbeing of Black boys is constantly under threat by systemic policies and practices that depict them as dangerous, silence their voices, and overlook their humanity.

Literature Review

Historical violence that began with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in 1614 has systematically caused these multifaceted issues in Black communities. (Givens, 2021). As a native

Black Queer West Philadelphian, I am committed to creating healing and safe spaces for Black male adolescents and young adults. I approach this paper through a reflexivity qualitative method to clearly describe the contextual intersecting relationships between the sense of belonging of Black boys and place through the creation of a group of Black boys called KingZ on the RiZe. This method not only increases the credibility of the findings (Berger, 2015) but also deepens our understanding of the work. Furthermore, the process of continual and deep self-examination takes effort and practice and is best learned through mentoring (Mitchell et al., 2018). Utilizing critical race theory, the theory of intersectionality, the literature of place, and Black placemaking to understand how the creation of a boy's group led to them constructing spaces and places that developed a sense of belonging.

Project/Program

To fully understand the experience of Black boys at this local school, we must acknowledge that geography plays a critical role in shaping their experience in school. With 1.6 million inhabitants, Philadelphia is the 6th largest city in the United States. Philadelphia is unique in that 44% population of the population is Black, making Philadelphia a majority-minority city. With 21% of its population living in poverty, Philadelphia is often referred to as "the largest poorest city in the United States." Each of these statistics bleeds into the education system. Philadelphia's education system is one of the poorest funded among the largest cities in America (Pew, 2018).

The majority of students at this local school do not have daily access to parks. They are used to

the concert jungle of Philadelphia, which includes few trees, outdated equipment, debris-covered pavement, remnants of drugs, and poverty. The external factors cultivated by the racial socio-economic geography of Philadelphia have led to students entering the building hungry, suffering from PTSD, a lack of self-esteem, and other emotional challenges. These challenges have contributed to academic barriers that Black boys face in the classroom. Unfortunately, due to the nature of education in America, the systems needed to support them are either unavailable or limited in scope.

Creating A Safe Space

During one of the Kingz on the RiZe sessions, students had the opportunity to reflect on their interests and educational goals and learn about Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Kingz on the RiZe created a space where my students and I can be vulnerable. I wanted them to have the opportunity to share their feelings, hopes, dreams, and nightmares in a safe space. Black boys are too often not afforded this privilege. Educators in academic spaces frequently label Black boys as troublesome, bad, angry, or uncontrollable.

People witness the anger of at-risk African American males through their behaviors, demeanor, music choices, and rebellious style. Seldom do they look like happy adolescents (Porter, 2012). Many of the Black boys in Kingz on the RiZe endured hardships that are all too common within marginalized communities. It was rare to see Raheem smile. Raheem lived with his aunt and did not have a healthy relationship with his mom or dad. This conflict caused him to lash out in anger. Hassan's family was struggling financially. Marcus's family was currently living in a shelter. Marcus is probably one of the brightest students I have ever taught. Michael was also living with his aunt. Michael suffered from Sickle Cell Anemia, a disease that is primarily found in people of the African diaspora. Due to his illness, there were times when Michael would miss months of school. He would come to school feeling like an outsider. Amir lived with his mom and was musically talented. He would come to school with anger and frustration. With all this being said, it is a reminder of why I must center this paper on Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality.

Critical race theory (CRT) forces me to center the lived experiences of Black people and acknowledge that race is a vital factor in their educational experience. CRT begins with the notion that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Because racism is meshed into the fabric of the U.S. social order, it appears normal and natural to people in this society. Utilizing CRT creates an opportunity to use counter-narrative to deconstruct my research in a manner that does not uphold white supremacy and Eurocentric standards and ideas. By uplifting the narratives of my students, I hope to provide a counter-narrative to the racist stereotypes of

Black boys.

Furthermore, uplifting Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality allows me to recognize that sex and gender also play a role in the challenges they endure. Intersectionality theory originated in the context of African American women's experiences and has since been expanded to encompass various aspects of identity, including race, gender, sexuality, and others.

According to Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, an individual's identity is shaped by multiple interconnected elements, including race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability (Crenshaw, 1989). It emphasizes that understanding the experiences of marginalized people requires an assessment of how these intersecting identities produce unique social situations. Using intersectionality, I examine how my students' race and gender played a role in their experiences and outcomes at school. As a Black queer man who grew up in a poverty-stricken neighborhood like many of my students, this created compounding barriers to achieving educational goals. There were times when I didn't have the necessary supplies for school or when I didn't have transportation to get to school. In a study examining the effects of poverty on the achievement of urban African-American male students, it was reported that when the level of poverty increases, the achievement level, as indicated by cumulative GPA, decreases (Welch, 2013).

The first task for that day's session was for students to answer the following questions:

- What is your favorite subject?
- Who is your role model?
- What is your career goal?
- What is your favorite sport?
- What is something you do for fun?
- What is one place you would like to go to that's not in the United States?

During our discussion, we had the opportunity to learn more about each other.

Raheem: I like reading. I love playing Apex. I look up to Stephen Curry

Michael: You can't even play ball.

Raheem: Shut up. You can't play either.

Amir: I'm better than both of you.

Hassan: Marcus is better than both of you.

Marcus: So you see, I like basketball cause I'm the best. But I do prefer football. I also play the guitar. I want to go to CAPA.

CAPA is Philly's top creative and performing arts high school. It is where Boyz II Men, Jazmine Sullivan, Questlove, and countless other Philly-born artists graduated from. Each of my students was talented and skilled in so many unique ways.

By creating a safe space, I hope to celebrate and affirm their talents in a way that reveals the diverse career paths they may not have considered. It always brought me joy to hear their laughter and playfulness. Far too often, Black play is overpoliced and criminalized. Black boys and the way they play are socially constructed as criminal, dangerous, and monstrous in schools and society at large (Bryan, 2015). Black children's bodies are assigned

racialized meanings, producing school-related and societal consequences (Rosen, 2017). Society has racialized Black children's bodies, forcing Black boys to navigate carceral systems and practices. More disturbingly, authorities have killed Black boys while they were simply playing.. Tamor Rice, a 12-year-old boy in Ohio, was playing with a toy gun when he was perceived as a threat by neighbors. The police shot and killed Tamir Rice without any warning. This act of state-sanctioned violence has produced a world where hyper-surveillance and systematic harm are treated as the norm when Black boys exist in a way that is opposite to white supremacy.

To counter the carceral systems, I share facilitation and responsibility with the boys. We co-created norms for our space, brainstormed topics to examine, and trips to attend. This relinquishing of power cultivated a space of trust, care, and compassion. There were times when the boys led workshops or discussions. These subtle acts of mentoring provided my students with an example regarding how to tap into their leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Mentoring a large group of students was not easy; there were times when I felt overwhelmed by the requests, needs, and crises of my students. This required me to set boundaries and teach them strategies to cope with depression, anxiety, stress, and other health and psychological challenges.

We practiced yoga, meditation, restorative justice, and other coping strategies by incorporating elements of their identity, including their race and place. This offered them an opportunity to see themselves reflected in the mentoring practices.

I am a firm believer that it is essential for youth, especially marginalized youth, to see themselves in the mentorship curriculum and practices.

The Power of Place

Barry Lopez (1997) argues that "if you're intimate with a place with a history you're familiar with and establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication is that the place knows you are there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, or abandoned." My students are intimate with the place of school and the community that surrounds it. Lopez's assertions are evident by my students' closeness to the boys' group we created together. The intimacy I shared with my students led to the using "Black placemaking" as a tool of healing. According to Hunter et al. (2016), Black Placemaking refers to how urban Black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance through social interaction. Originally, Kingz on the RiZe was designed to address the behaviors of my Black male students. However, I learned that they needed a place to feel loved, connected, and a sense of belonging. They taught me that being the big bad dean does not equate to disrupting the challenges they face, both in and out of school. The concept of Black Placemaking transforms previously oppressive geographies of a city into sites of play, pleasure, celebration,

and politics (Hunter et al., 2016). Northwest Academy was our geographic space. Through our exchange of dialogue, activities, and programs, we celebrated our achievements while having fun. During our discussion about HBCUs, we celebrated their aspirations for higher education.

Me: Do everyone know what an HBCU is?

Raheem: Yeah, it's a school for Black people.

Hassan: Sounds familiar.

Me: HBCU stands for Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Michael: Did you go to one?

Me: No, but I wish I did. HBCUs were not promoted at my high school. I felt it was critical to discuss HBCUs because I believe they provide a safe space for Black students to learn, grow, and heal. In high school, my school encouraged everyone to attend state-owned schools, even though Cheney University and Lincoln University were state-owned institutions, but they were never mentioned.

After watching a video about HBCUs, we had a discussion about what we learned.

Amir: Tuskegee University seems dope.

Michael: FAMA looks fun.

Raheem: I want to go to Spelman. That's where all the girls are.

James (laughing): That would be fun.

Me: Omg, y'all are too much. If you want to be close to the girls, you can go to Moorehouse. It's literally across the street from Spelman.

Hassan: See, you're giving Mr. Will a headache

Me: Hassan, you don't got to yell. I'm right next to you. Thank you. I'm happy that y'all shared so much about yourself. I want you to remember these HBCUs cause when you get to high school, you can apply to any of these schools.

Through laughter, dialogue, and play, they were exposed to a new world that was hidden from them to sustain whiteness.

Findings

Lopez (1997) reminds me that "the key to becoming vulnerable to a place is opening yourself up. You can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy may come a sense of belonging, not being isolated in the universe." Trust is a prerequisite for nurturing vulnerability and developing genuine loving relationships. Through the KingZ on the RiZe program, the students began taking up space and creating their own spaces of belonging and support. As the program continued, many middle school boys developed relationships with the

lower schools, thus creating an organic mentor program that I did not plan. This program created a space where they could simply enjoy being themselves while helping the younger students. They demonstrated an ability to reclaim academic spaces and transform them into places of healing and support. They would meet in the hallway, behind the stairway, in the backyard, cafeteria, and various other places.

Conclusion

Too often, I hear from teachers about how the students' behavior and academic performance have changed. However, the students in KingZ on the RiZe and I created change together. We created a space where I was not the authority, but rather a facilitator and mentor. Research has shown that Black males have an increased likelihood of graduating from high school when they are exposed to role models who have secured economic success through academic achievement (Wint et al., 2022). Additionally, a sense of support and belonging from teachers, mentors, counselors, or coaches contributes positively to school attendance, academic performance, sense of self, and educational aspirations (Brooms, 2013; Brooms, 2019; Osterman, 2000). I was able to create a space for my Black male students that was not available for me when I was in school. I remember searching for the right after-school program in middle school that would allow me to be who I am. Drawing on the lessons and challenges, KingZ on the RiZe fostered a community that promoted vulnerability and trust by affirming and uplifting their humanity, thereby promoting their wellbeing in a manner that acknowledges their history and culture.

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