African American Boys’ Views of Family as Support for School

A Report to the School District of Beloit

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First in the series

Reaching Out to Underrepresented Groups in Wisconsin
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Abstract

The inadequate education many African American children receive contributes to and perpetuates socioeconomic, health, and other inequalities throughout the course of their lives. This problem is particularly acute for African American males. Research has yielded important insights into the factors and processes that affect academic outcomes for African American children, including the role of social support and networks for academic success. Although we have made progress in identifying many of the factors that promote and inhibit school success, we still know little about the nature of school-related support networks for African American boys. We address this gap in our knowledge through an analysis of egocentric network maps developed from interviews with 28 African American boys in grades 4–6. Our findings indicate that the boys have support networks more extensive than we expected, and more than assumed or known by school staff. In addition to expected support from their mothers, the boys reported significant support from peers and adult males, and their support often included multiple households and multiple communities. We discuss the implications of these findings with respect to how support networks might function as a setting for “natural mentors” for African American boys.
Introduction

The failure of schools to adequately educate African American children contributes to and perpetuates socioeconomic, health, and other inequalities across the life course. Research addressing academic low achievement for African American children has yielded important insights into the factors and processes that affect their academic outcomes. We know that the cumulative effects of poverty and inadequate school resources are key predictors of poor outcomes. We also know that similarities and differences between children's and teachers' cultures can influence student engagement and learning for African American children. We have also gained insight from African American children about what they find encouraging and what they find troubling in their school experiences. Finally, we have become keenly aware that parental involvement in the education of children, and social support and social networks can profoundly influence children's academic outcomes.

Indeed, education reform policies and efforts now routinely stress the importance of parental involvement, and Title 1, Part A of No Child Left Behind emphasizes that parents are responsible for the educational success of children in partnership with school staff and community groups. In order to establish and sustain partnerships, parents and guardians, school staff, and community groups must know one another and communicate regularly.

Undoubtedly, culture and family-school relationships are keys to the educational success of children, and in the last two decades, researchers and educators have made progress in reaching out to parents and incorporating cultural elements into educational settings. However, an important aspect of cultural life for African American children includes the structure and practices of family life. To date, researchers and practitioners have primarily focused on parents or households as the relevant sources of school support and involvement for African American children. However, many African American children participate in and receive support from social families that extend beyond the nuclear family structure or the immediate household. Current parent and family involvement conceptualizations and practices may fail to reflect the actual daily culture of African American students and their families. Through an examination of how African American students perceive and experience support for school from family and others, this study aims to illuminate ways to better engage social support as a tool for children's school success.

Social networks and parental involvement

In this study, we combined two theoretical frameworks to develop our research questions and design: social networks and parent involvement. The following summarizes the key aspects of these frameworks that are relevant to this report.

Social networks

Social network theory emphasizes the importance of social relationships as sources of social capital, information, and resources. The school experiences of low-income African American boys are situated within a context of home, community, peer, and school relationships. These relationships create a
social ecology in which the boys variously receive encouragement and support or encounter barriers and impediments to school success. We were particularly interested in two dimensions of social networks: closure and diversity. In social network theory, closure is the degree to which individuals in a child’s network know and communicate with each other, monitor the child’s behaviors, and have shared values, expectations, and practices for the child. Within the theory’s context, diversity refers to people who possess diverse personal characteristics (e.g., occupation and education). Research with low-income, urban, African American children suggests they benefit from significant closure in their networks. Diversity is another important dimension of supportive and resilient networks because diverse individuals who are members of different social networks can increase the range and kind of opportunities, information, and other resources available to children.

**Parent and family involvement research**

This research has established that parent support for children’s education is associated with student academic achievement. Most studies of parent and family involvement focus on the school’s definition of involvement and reflect the kinds of concerns expressed by school staff such as monitoring student’s homework, setting high expectations, and reliable and responsive communication with school staff.

Rarely do we consider the views of students and parents with respect to involvement and support. We do not know what kinds of family behaviors African American children view as supportive, nor do we know whether or not adults and other supportive individuals provide support that is different from the support prescribed by schools.

As stated earlier, many African American children live in family structures and social ecologies that do not reflect the assumptions of family involvement and support literatures. Rather, they live in a variety of adaptive family structures that have historically helped African American families survive and meet their psychosocial, cultural, and material needs (Jarrett, 1998; Jarrett and Burton, 1999; Nobles, 1997; Sudarkasa, 1997). This is especially true for low-income and working-class African American families. It is within these adaptive structures that many African American families find ways to provide support for and be involved in their children’s education. Researchers and practitioners alike know little about these adaptive family systems and the ways they strive to support school success for African American children.

**Study background**

This study is part of a larger ongoing project developed through a partnership between the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, the School District of Beloit, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction that examines the school experiences of elementary and middle school-age African American boys. In the initial stage of the study, we conducted a case study of the special education referral process from the perspectives of an African American first-grade boy, his family, and school staff. In this study, we identified the missed opportunities and negative consequences that resulted
from low levels of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2000; Kochanek, 2005) between the school staff and the family.

We subsequently developed and implemented an African American boys’ storytelling project, the Kilembe Brotherhood Project, with six African American fourth- and fifth-grade boys. Using an Angolan hero’s story with the theme of brothers looking out for and supporting one another, this project provided the boys with an opportunity to examine their journeys through elementary school and develop mutual support and solidarity. Using traditional storytelling methods, they also explored positive experiences of teaching and learning at home and at school around which they developed a story they presented at a regional storyteller’s conference.

During each of the first two projects, we became increasingly aware that the boys routinely talked about and described supportive relationships from a variety of individuals largely unknown to and underutilized by the school. Moreover, this evidence of support challenged researchers’ and school staff’s views about low-income African American boys and their families. This current study is an effort to systematically examine the nature of support for school for 28 African American boys in grades 4-6.

**Research questions and methodologies**

The following questions guided this study:

1. What kinds of school-related support do African American boys in elementary and middle school report receiving?
2. From whom do they report receiving school-related support?
3. What is the geography of their support?

In addition, given some evidence that boys have better outcomes when they have the involvement of male adults in their lives (Cochran & Riley, 1990), we especially wanted to examine the extent to which African American boys report having support for school from adult males in their lives. Scholars and practitioners have also expressed concern about the potential negative effects of peer culture on attitudes toward school among low-income African American boys. With this in mind, we also examined the nature of reported peer support for school.

We conducted individual interviews with 28 African American boys in grades 4-6 to develop egocentric social support maps from two elementary schools and one middle school in Beloit, Wisconsin. We asked the boys’ principals, teachers, and other school personnel to nominate boys who represented an equal mix of supported and non-supported students, based on their own perceptions and criteria. In general, school staff viewed parents as the primary source of support or non-support. Most used personal knowledge, previous interactions with families, and reports from children as the basis of their evaluation of support. The absence or presence of a father in the household was the most common explanation of support or non-support; teachers generally perceived children without fathers
at home as less supported than those with a father at home. Moreover, school staff stressed parental monitoring of a child’s schoolwork, responding to the school’s communication, and expressing a positive attitude about school achievement to the child as the most important forms of parental support for school.

We developed interview questions based on an earlier study by Lewis and Hilgendorf (2007), and the Survey of Children’s Social Support (Dubow & Ullman, 1989). The interview helped us identify whom the boys reported as providing actual and potential instrumental, emotional, and informational support, and where supportive individuals lived.

We made child-centered support maps, based on each child’s responses to the questions. We conducted thematic open coding, which means we looked at the responses and grouped similar responses together to identify patterns or themes in the data, and put them into clusters. The following are preliminary results from the first phase of data analysis.

**Who provides support?**

**Support from adults**

The 28 boys in this study collectively identified 206 individuals who provided school-related support. The range in the number of supportive individuals reported by any given boy was from 2 to 12. The average number of individuals identified by the boys was 7.3. These individuals included parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, school and community program staff, friends, cousins, family friends, and the parents of their friends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support person</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Percentage of total responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community programs</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandfather</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other adults</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we grouped the responses into clusters, combining responses according to their relative relationship to the child (e.g., mother and father grouped as parents, brothers and sisters grouped as siblings, etc.), we continued to find diversity in the boys’ support networks. Not surprisingly, parents made up nearly one-quarter of all responses, and the boys shared a wide range of ways that their parents supported them for school success. Although many of the boys lived in single parent, female-headed households, a number of boys reported having support from non-residential
fathers. After parents, grandparents accounted for 14% of the responses. Some boys lived with their grandparents while others had contact with grandparents with varying frequencies. Support for school from unrelated adults came primarily from staff of after-school community programs (7.8%) and school staff (5.3%).

**Support from other children**

Surprisingly, siblings and friends each made up 13% of the boys’ support networks. Put another way, slightly more than 1 in 4 of the supportive individuals named by the boys were friends and siblings. When we add cousins to the total, slightly more than 1 in 3 of the boys’ reported support networks were comprised of other children, suggesting that the boys can and do find support among their peers. Indeed, the boys not only named children as support, they reported receiving specific types of support that ranged from providing instrumental support in the form of homework assistance to providing strategies for dealing with anger or frustration at school.

Although many of these supportive children appeared in response to a question about with whom the boys would share the news if they won an award, which is potential rather than actual support, children also showed up in significant numbers in other parts of the support networks. For example, of the 101 individuals the boys collectively identified as helping them with their homework, 24 were other children.

**Table 2: Responses: Who helps with homework?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support person</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunts and uncles</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community programs</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other adults</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Supports that help boys be “good students”**

In order to answer the question of what kinds of adult behaviors the boys reported as supportive of school, we asked them to tell us who helps them be a “good student” and what these individuals do to provide this kind of support. A content analysis identified four categories into which we grouped the responses. These included providing:

1. various forms of instrumental support
2. informational and moral support
3. support to develop school-oriented attitudes, behaviors, and habits
4. support to meet the basic needs of the child

In many respects, the support named by the boys—including boys that teachers identified as unsupported—agreed with the support desired by teachers. However, the boys described support that was more varied than that named by teachers, and at times, surprising. Moreover, the support the boys discussed was often complex and layered, which suggests individuals provide multidimensional support.

**Instrumental support**

Instrumental support for academic achievement was complex and included a variety of directly and indirectly supportive behaviors. Our analysis resulted in three categories that included: help with homework, providing enrichment or extra practice of skills, and modeling school-like activities. Responses included a variety of parental efforts, such as providing direct help with homework, holding children accountable for completing homework, and providing enrichment or extra practice of school-related skills. For example, one child reported: “…[my mom] seen I had [my homework] late and I was trying to work on it and I had some things wrong and she, she corrected it, like told me it was wrong and told me to fix it….I think it helped me ‘cause I know she can help me and correct me because she knows what’s going on.”

This example is complex. Not only does the child report that the mother provides monitoring (“seen I had [my homework] late”) and direct instrumental support (“she corrected it”), his response implies that because of her support, he may feel more at ease (“I know that she can help me and correct me”).

Some of the boys reported that supportive individuals sometimes gave them opportunities to have additional practice with schoolwork, while others reported playing school with other children. In these cases, the boys reported that the practice of school-like activities in non-school settings provided instrumental support (e.g., extra homework), as well as a context in which they practiced responding to or negotiating a variety of potential teacher-student interactions (i.e., playing school). Boys reported reproducing both positive school experiences (e.g., going on fieldtrips) and negative experiences (e.g., resisting teacher control) in their play.

**Accountability and informational and moral support**

A number of the boys’ responses related to being held accountable for their behaviors, and informational support, particularly about managing emotions and behaviors. Some boys reported that parents monitored their behaviors in the form of checking up on homework, as well as coming to school unannounced to talk with staff and to observe the boy. For instance, one boy said: “[My father] had told my mom to be at the school…to come to school in the morning and sit in the office, and come and see me…She give me a test, that say ‘How do you think I know how you did in school today?’”
Multiple layers of support and an array of potentially supportive behaviors are embedded in this example, both of which held true for many of the examples. First, the boy’s parents communicate with each other about the plan to monitor, providing shared knowledge and creating a degree of network closure (i.e., strong ties between supportive adults along with shared expectations in the boy’s network). Moreover, the mother’s presence at school provided additional opportunity for communication with school personnel, potentially increasing network closure. When the mother told the child that she had observed him, she explicitly incorporated the child into the system of support and communication, reinforcing expectations of good behavior. The boy’s response also suggests that the mother’s time in the school’s office allowed school staff to see her as an involved parent, potentially helping them to perceive her as a supportive parent. Teacher perceptions of support can directly affect student outcomes (Brophy & Good, 1970; Jussim & Harber, 2005, Mandara, 2006). Finally, although the father lived in another city, the boy perceived and experienced him as supportive, demonstrating that distance is not necessarily a barrier to support within a child’s family system.

Indeed, several of the boys described support from individuals who lived in other cities. Support from distant cities included indirect monitoring of children, as described above. Another boy reported that he talks to his father by phone every weekend, although his father lives in a city two hours away. Support also came from adults that were not in the immediate families or blood relatives of the boys, but who were part of broader social families. For example, one boy reported that he had occasional direct contact with a friend’s mother who lived in another city and whom the boy found encouraging. This friend’s mother provided both instrumental and emotional support. He found her caring towards him and indicated she encouraged him to be caring toward others. She also provided advice about school, prompting the boy to summarize his appreciation for her, saying, “She just tells me all the right things.”

**Support to develop school-oriented attitudes, behaviors, and habits**

Many boys discussed forms of support that contributed to developing positive dispositions toward school. Most often boys spoke of the encouragement and expectations individuals communicated to them, from general urgings to “do good” to extended conversations about the importance of “getting your education” in order to have a happy life. Sometimes these talks took the form of an individual sharing a personal story or life lesson with the boy. One boy recognized the relevance and benefit of a story his stepmother shared with him about an experience at work: “[My stepmother] tells me what happened at her job… and what she did do wrong and she admitted that she did it….It told me to tell the truth and not blame it on other people.”

It is important to note the vulnerability and integrity (Lewis & Kim, 2008; Palmer, 1998) of the boy’s stepmother in revealing private details of her life to encourage positive behaviors in her stepson—an action he readily values. It seems unlikely that such an interaction would be as valued by the boy if he had an insecure or remote relationship with his stepmother.
Moreover, we must note that this occurred within the context of a relationship that school staff did not view as providing significant support. Dominant cultural frameworks about the role of stepmothers in families may bias how school staff view these relationships and their potential as a source of support for the child. Similarly, dominant beliefs about non-residential fathers may prevent school staff and others who work with African American boys from seeing these fathers as active agents in the boys’ lives. This underscores the need to identify supportive individuals from the child’s perspective in order to enhance our ability to recognize and understand how children view and value social relationships, and inform our perceptions of the boys’ families and social networks.

**Support to provide for basic needs**

The boys in this study also experienced the efforts to provide for their daily needs and their emotional well-being as support for school. Some of the boys expressed appreciation for individuals’ efforts to keep them fed, clothed, and supplied for school. Others talked about individuals who provided for their emotional needs. In contrast to popular views of low-income African American males cultivating “an emotionless, fearless, and aloof front” or “cool pose” (Majors & Billison, 1992), many of the boys in this study valued emotional closeness and security as an important form of school-related support. Here’s a response that demonstrates this: “It helps me a lot knowing that [my mom]’s really going to be there. Like when I get in trouble or something, or I need help with something. Then that makes me a lot happier so then I can concentrate up in school.”

While many boys identified parents and grandparents who fulfilled these emotional needs, some boys identified other individuals. For example, one boy described one of his after-school teachers as “like my third dad.” In subsequent interviews of eight seventh-grade boys the following year, we found that the boys continued to view adults as providing emotional support, including middle school teachers. School staff is less likely to know of supportive individuals outside the family and none of the middle school teachers knew that boys in their classroom viewed them as providing emotional support. This underscores the value of asking the boys themselves about their support networks.

**Support from males**

As we noted earlier, broad concern exists over what is viewed as the relative absence of African American males in the lives of African American boys from low-income families. Indeed, many of the boys in our study did reside in female-headed single parent families. However, contrary to the perceptions and assumptions of school staff, adult males nevertheless played a significant role in the support networks reported by the boys with 25 of the 28 boys reporting some form of support from adult males. When we consider the number of times the boys named male children as providing support, males made up about 38 percent of the total number of supportive individuals reported by the boys in our study.

Consistent with the findings of Pate (2002), many of the men named by the boys were non-residential fathers who were nevertheless involved in the boys’ lives. Some of the men were surrogate fathers
(i.e., boyfriends and partners unmarried to the boys’ mothers). Brothers, cousins, and friends also played significant roles in the support network, and the boys identified male support as particularly important when they were in trouble and needed support. For example, one boy said: “[My dad] picked me up from school and it was just me and him riding home together. He said, ‘Okay, why do you look so sad?’ And then I told him and...he tell me don’t talk to them, just listen to the teacher and ignore them. And that was good advice.”

Another boy shared the following: “If I can’t talk to my mom, I talk to my dad. If I can’t talk to my dad, I talk to my Uncle Zeke. If I can’t talk to my Uncle Zeke, I talk to my Uncle Will. If I can’t talk to my Uncle Will, I talk to my cousin.”

Adult males appear throughout the boys’ support networks. For example, adult males (including fathers, grandfathers, uncles, boyfriends of mothers, and other community members) accounted for 23 of the 101 individuals the boys identified as providing homework support. However, men appeared even more significantly in questions of emotional support. For some boys, males showed up only in response to the question of needing support when they are in trouble. Indeed, men appeared in this category at a proportionately higher rate than other categories. Although our data does not provide a clear explanation for why this occurs, this category tended to have fewer individual names, probably because being in trouble could be viewed as a high-risk situation that required support from the most trusted and competent individuals in the boys’ support networks. Consistent with this, one boy reported that he wanted his father there because “he (his father) would know what to do.” In this case, the boy lived with both parents, but his father did not appear anywhere else in his support network.

Adult males accounted for 13 of the 38 adults the boys collectively identified as potential support when in trouble (34%), significantly above the 20% of total male support for the boys. In addition, males made up a significant number of the individuals the boys turn to (actual support) when they have a bad day. In general, we found a much greater male presence in the lives of the boys than was known or assumed by the school, particularly when the boys needed someone to provide practical and emotional support when they were troubled.

**Geography of support**

Finally, we asked the boys to identify where the supportive individuals lived and to explain the supportive individuals’ relationships to the boys. A content analysis revealed that the boys reported support from these five types of locations:

**HH:** Household or the boy’s primary household

**LHH:** Local household or a household not the child’s, but in the same community

**DHH:** Distant household” or a household not the child’s and in another community
CP: Community program or local community programs and institutions, such as after-school programs and churches

SCH: School or support from the child’s school

When a boy reported more than one local or non-local household, we numbered each.

Table 3: Example of geography of support table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary household</th>
<th>Local household</th>
<th>Distant household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mom (HH)</td>
<td>Dad (HH)</td>
<td>Brother (LHH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandma (DHH)</td>
<td>Grandpa (DHH)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhappy day</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, in Table 3, the boy’s mother and father lived in the child’s primary household (HH). The boy reported that his mother provided support in all four areas, whereas his father only provided homework support. The boy’s brother lived in a separate household in the same community and provided homework support, while his grandparents lived together in another community. He reported that his grandparents provided support for an unhappy day, receiving an award, and support if he were in trouble.

Table 4 summarizes the range of support that the boys reported by location and from where the boys received the majority of their support. The percentage of support that boys reported receiving from their primary household (HH) varied across a wide range. One boy reported that he received only 8% of his support from within the household, while another boy reported receiving 92% of his total support from his primary household. Six boys reported that they received the majority of their support from individuals outside their primary households (1-LHH, 2-DHH, 2-SCH, and 1-CP).

What is of particular interest is that two boys reported that they received the majority of their support from households in other communities. This is consistent with the reports from many of the boys that their families made regular trips to visit family in other cities one-to-three hours away, and had regular phone conversations with supportive adults in other cities, including calls to discuss school and homework.
Table 4: Support by location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Range of support by location</th>
<th>Majority of support by location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household (HH)</td>
<td>8%-92%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local households (LHH)</td>
<td>0%-66%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant households (DHH)</td>
<td>0%-58%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School (SCH)</td>
<td>0%-81%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community programs (CP)</td>
<td>0%-62%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirteen of the twenty boys included in this analysis reported receiving the majority of their support from one location. However, six reported support networks that were somewhat equally spread over two locations (Table 5). Three boys reported balanced support from their primary household and other local households. One boy reported relatively balanced support from his primary household and distant households. Another reported balanced support from his primary household and local community programs, and one boy reported the majority of his support coming equally from other local households and school. This child was one of the few who reported little support at home.

Table 5: Balanced support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Balanced locations</th>
<th>Number of boys (N=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary household (HH)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local households (LHH)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary household (HH)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant households (DHH)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary household (HH)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community programs (CP)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local household (HH)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School (SCH)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The important point is that the boys’ support networks consist of a diverse constellation of support. For the low-income families in this study, social and extended families effectively provided resources and support that were not always available within the boys’ primary households. Although distance between the households might create challenges, many of the boys reported some ability to access long-distance support.

When boys can’t find support

We are still gathering data on the boys’ experiences of not having support, so our analysis in this section is preliminary and suggestive. However, in follow-up interviews, we will be asking the boys: “Tell us of a time when you needed help or support at home or at school and you could not get it.”

A content analysis from follow-up interviews with boys in the first semester of grades 6 or 7 suggests
that, in general, the boys have little trouble identifying someone who can provide them with all kinds of support. However, the data revealed two circumstances that might deserve closer examination:

1. The first is a situation in which the individual commonly available for support was simply not around (e.g., a parent is not at home or a teacher has left the classroom). These were generally short-term situations and the preliminary data suggests these are not chronic or serious problems for the boys.

2. A second theme deserves closer attention. Some of the boys reported that despite needing assistance and having an adult who could provide assistance available, they did not seek help from that person because the adult had previously responded with anger or frustration to a request for help. When this individual is the only person available, the boys report dealing with their need for help on their own, sometimes with frustration and anger. The boys reported this occurring at home and at school.

Discussion
Natural mentors for African American boys

One of the more common approaches to securing support for African American males has been through mentoring programs. The National Mentoring Partnership defines mentors as “caring individuals who, along with parents or guardians, provide young people with support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and a constructive example” (Mentor, 2005). Mentors can also teach and challenge their protégés.

However, positive effects from mentoring require a number of conditions. In a recent meta-analysis of the existing literature, only modest overall benefits from a youth’s participation in formal mentoring programs were found, except for programs that incorporated several theoretically and empirically based “best practices.” Among these best practices were ongoing training for mentors, structured activities for matches, expectations for frequent mentor-mentee contact, established mechanisms to support mentors, and parental involvement in the program.

The duration of the mentoring relationship also has important implications for youth outcomes. Children involved in mentoring relationships of more than one year were most likely to report significant increases in self-worth, scholastic competence, social acceptance and other benefits, whereas children who experienced the shortest relationships (less than three months) reported actual declines in self-worth and feelings of competence.

The quality of the mentor-mentee relationship is also highly important to positive outcomes for youth. One study found that mentors’ reports of emotional closeness in the mentoring relationship highly correlated with perceived benefits to the protégé. Emotional closeness is also associated with fewer perceived obstacles in the relationship.
Finally, formal mentoring programs have only been able to reach a relatively small percentage of African American boys. Many children who want to participate in formal mentoring programs must wait a year or more, and many cannot meet the criteria necessary for success. In addition, most approaches to mentoring fail to identify or tap into existing available support within the social ecologies of African American boys.

**Support networks and natural mentoring for African American boys**

Research on natural mentors, or very important non-parent adults, suggests that individuals in a youth’s existing social networks can fulfill important mentoring roles. In a community sample of urban and suburban adolescents, one study found that a large majority (82%) reported having an important, very important, or truly key non-parent adult in their lives. These mentor-like relationships were part of the adolescent experience and developed naturally and gradually over time, not in response to family crises or other special circumstances. Additionally, of the important non-parent adults whom adolescents identified in their study, approximately half were relatives, including aunts and uncles, older siblings, grandparents, and cousins. These results are consistent with the findings of our study. Mentor-like relationships that developed with adult relatives already in the child’s life continued significantly longer than those with non-relatives did, and these adults were more likely to place high value on their relationship with the adolescents. The support provided was also more diverse than that of non-related adults, including both instrumental and social forms of support.

From our perspective, the inherent character of natural mentors, especially individuals with a relative or relative-like (fictive relative) relationship with the youth might better meet the conditions necessary to promote positive outcomes for mentored individuals. Natural mentors may be more likely to sustain a long-term mentoring relationship with a boy because they have already navigated the often challenging relationship-building stage. They may be more aware of the boy’s needs and challenges, and to have the support of the boy’s parents. Moreover, emotional closeness between the natural mentor and the boy may already be present, increasing the chance of positive outcomes for the child and the continuation of the relationship.

In general, our formal data and our observations of the boys and their families over the past four years support these ideas about natural mentors. Most of the boys in our study identified supportive adults other than the care-giving parent, most often members of their extended and social families. The support these individuals provided was consistent with formal definitions of mentoring. For example, the boys spoke often of the encouragement and reinforcement important individuals communicated to them. Among other things, the mentors told the boys “to do the right thing” in school, communicated clear, high expectations for the boys, and celebrated the boys’ successes. Some boys recognized ways in which the natural mentors modeled positive school-related behavior or shared personal stories and life lessons relevant to their schooling. Many of these individuals also provided instrumental help with schoolwork, paralleling the tutoring activities included in many mentoring programs.
In an earlier home interview with a supportive African American adult male for a first-grade African American boy, the man admitted to making serious mistakes in his life that prevented him from graduating from high school. Despite the fact that he hadn’t graduated, he had been a good student. He used his knowledge of how to be successful and reflections on his mistakes to help his surrogate children navigate elementary school and high school. This particular male wanted to spend time in the school to provide support for the first-grade boy, but was viewed by the school as an unhealthy influence solely because he had spent time in prison. They had no other knowledge of the man, though they had opportunities to engage him when they made home visits at the child’s home. The school never asked the child or the grandmother who was raising him who supported the boy at home.

Our study raises questions about the utility or accuracy of the distinction between parenting and mentoring, as these appear to be blended in the boys’ networks. Multiple non-parental adults within social families appeared to participate in parenting many of the boys in our study, often across multiple households. Thus, the boyfriends of mothers, grandparents, and aunts and uncles often had overlapping and mutually supportive roles in raising the boys in our study.

Although we believe that we must find ways to connect schools with African American boys’ natural mentors, issues related to poverty compromise and limit these supportive relationships. Stressful family issues, including inadequate childcare, job loss, incarceration of a parent, and transient supportive adults, compromised the consistency and, at times, the viability of the boys’ support, but not necessarily the adults’ desire and attempts to support the boys. Natural mentors within low socioeconomic status networks or households likely have few opportunities to connect boys with more advantaged individuals or important institutions, such as higher education institutions and employers.

However, members of the school typically have access to this type of bridging capital and if they are able to develop a mutually respectful relationship with members of the boys’ support networks, they can enhance and extend the boys’ supports, providing social capital to the network (the boys and their mentors), and thereby strengthen the entire social network. Additionally, communicate between the school and the boy’s social network about the boy’s education creates opportunities for network closure and the exchange of bonding social capital that encloses the boy in a community of people with a shared interest in his school and social success.

**Conclusions**

Contemporary research on brain-based learning suggests that the quality of interpersonal relationships and safe and familiar classrooms for students and their teachers enhance teaching, learning, and well-being (Taylor, 2006). We can easily extend this observation to include the parents and other supportive adults. If we transform our schools into environments that feel safe and familiar to supportive adults, we enhance their participation in our schools and the lives of our children, as well the work of all members of our school communities.
The social worlds of African American boys are often largely unknown or viewed negatively by school staff and others in our society. However, our data demonstrates that the boys’ proximal social worlds include many caring individuals who could help schools be more effective and successful in their work. The boys expressed some ambivalence about school; they did not always view it as “safe and familiar.” At the same time, all of the boys in the sixth-grade sample named between one and three teachers with whom they felt comfortable. When we looked at the list of teachers collectively named by the boys, most of the sixth-grade teachers had at least one African American boy who experienced their classroom as a positive place. Given the relatively small sample size of this study, we view this as significant and a hopeful sign that we can establish productive and caring relationships between the boys and their teachers.

**Recommendations**

As we have shown, African American boys in this study reported instrumental, informational, and emotional support from a wide range of individuals within their support networks. These individuals not only provided many traditional kinds of support (e.g., help with homework, monitoring school behaviors, etc.) they also reported non-traditional forms of support (e.g., instructive stories from a parent’s life). The boys’ support networks were diverse, suggesting they are potentially resilient. The geography or location of their support often spanned multiple households and, at times, stretched between multiple cities. Contrary to popular views of low-income African American boys, a significant number of males (adults and peers) made up the boys’ reported school-related support.

Given the need for schools and others to find ways to develop positive and supportive relationships with the families of African American students in general, and boys in particular, we have the following broad recommendations that may serve as the basis for strategies or activities aimed at improving school-related support for African American boys.

1. Educators must more consistently view African American students and their families as resource-rich and full partners in support of the boys’ education. One key way to accomplish this is to create opportunities for the boys to share this information with school staff. In our experience, this is best accomplished by listening carefully to the boys and showing a real interest in their lives. Deep and respectful listening can also transform the interpersonal relationship between school staff and the boys, make the school or classroom “safe and familiar,” and improve the climate for teaching and learning.

2. Our data strongly supports the need for schools to develop a broader concept of family support—one that goes beyond what is typically called parent involvement—and find ways for schools to partner with these support systems. The two aspects of this recommendation provide us with more and new options for supporting positive outcomes for African American boys:
a. We must look beyond parents and identify the individuals who actually provide school-related instrumental and emotional support, and find ways to at least communicate with them and support their efforts.

b. We must also expand our understanding of what constitutes support. The boys reported receiving both traditional and non-traditional types of support. We must first identify the ways that parents can support their child's education. Then combined with what the boys actually experience as supportive, we must establish additional ways to provide and enhance support for the boys.

3. Men matter to these boys, and they regularly appear in support networks even when they live in separate households and separate cities. Nevertheless, we should learn more about the men who matter to these boys, and where possible, find ways to partner with them and connect them with schools.

4. Finally, peers were more significant in the support networks of the boys than we anticipated. This is encouraging because it points to positive elements within their peer culture. We must find ways to identify and support or otherwise engage the peer relationships that the boys report as providing school-related support. Doing so has the potential to cultivate school engagement as a normative part of their peer culture.

This study can potentially help inform efforts to strengthen family-school relationships between African American families and their children's schools by identifying key supportive individuals previously unknown to the school. Furthermore, the school may be able to connect with these supportive individuals and learn more about the child. This, in turn, can help educators and families develop consistent and shared expectations for the boys, creating more continuity between home and school. Finally, stronger, mutually supportive relationships between adults and teachers can facilitate the effective flow of knowledge and resources from home to school and from school to home, supporting the success for all involved in the education of African American boys.
References


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