The Boys and Men of Color Framework:
A Model for Community and Systems Change

Key Details

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Racialized Youth, Policy, Advocacy, Health Disparities, Trauma-Informed Practice, Social Justice

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Racialized Youth

STEPPING UP THEMES
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"Building the authentic engagement of young people is a powerful strategy for driving policy change, but developing this capacity is labor- and time-intensive. It involves far more than simply organizing training events, for example; it involves...working with young people over time to embed an understanding of government, systems, bias, and how change and reform happen" (p. 111).

1. What is the research about?
People of colour face systemic discrimination that often creates barriers to meaningful engagement in school, work, and other institutions. Boys and young men of colour, specifically, are often removed from schools for minor violations of the rules, left with few employment prospects, and pushed towards involvement in the criminal justice system. Communities and non-profit organizations have responded to these injustices by working to galvanize communities, resist and change racial discrimination, and create new opportunities by engaging in systems change work at the local and state levels. This article details the experiences of various organizations in advocating for change to better support boys and men of colour.

2. Where did the research take place?
This research examines examples of organizations working in different contexts throughout the United States, including in California, New York, New Orleans, and Colorado.

3. Who is this research about?
This research is about organizations that work to support boys and young men of colour, who the authors define as Black, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous.

4. How was the research done?
The authors reflected on their experiences working at PolicyLink, a non-profit organization, as well as the experiences of other organizations doing similar work, in order to share evidence-based practices that have been successful in creating change.

5. What are the key findings?
The researchers summarize their observations about what is needed to successfully work with and on behalf of men and boys of colour into four key points:

A) Take a collective impact approach.
Single-issue (e.g. improving grade three reading levels) or single-system (e.g. juvenile justice) interventions, while necessary, are NOT sufficient to make meaningful change. Rather a 'cradle-to-career,' place-based approach appears to be more effective. **Supports for boys and men of colour should work across systems and issues, engaging multiple organizations and disciplines.** An example is the New York City-based Young Men's Initiative, which focuses on reducing inequalities for young Black and Latino men and works across 20 city agencies and 200+ community-based organizations.

While not currently the norm, philanthropic collaborations could help organizations working across different sectors agree on shared results and an easier process for getting funding and reporting on program outcomes.

B) Initiatives that make a significant impact are usually complex and unfold over a long period of time; to make such initiatives work, it's essential to have intermediaries at various levels in order to increase capacity and policy impact.

Intermediaries can provide 'backbone' support, and serve as **conveners and facilitators, bringing together multiple stakeholders hoping to collaborate for increased impact**. An example is the California Alliance for Boys and Men of Color; PolicyLink serves as an intermediary of this alliance, linking actors across the state to lobby for policy change. In the last four years, they been involved in having 30+ new bills signed into law, and have done advocacy on prison reform, restorative practices in education, and other important issues.

C) As boys and young men of colour are disproportionally impacted by multiple forms of discrimination, adversity, and trauma, using culturally-relevant trauma-informed practices can improve individual well-being, as well as system-level outcomes.
The wellbeing of youth of colour is inextricably linked to how connected/rooted they feel to their own cultural identities, values, and practices. As these have been fractured in many racialized communities as a result of racism, cultivating healing may be dependent on (re)building connections to cultural identity.

When using these practices (e.g. healing circles), it is essential to note that if they are not implemented in a thoughtful and reflective way, they can be harmful rather than healing. **Facilitation of these practices should ensure that culture and context have been appropriately integrated, and that issues of power have been adequately addressed.**

People working within systems that serve youth also need to engage in their own healing, as they are often "scarred" (p. 108) by the way they interact with youth and communities. **This healing, for the people working within youth-serving systems, is about changing the relationship between the institutions they work in and the youth they serve.** For example, the aim of spiritual healing/restoring people's humanity frames all of the work of the San Joaquin County Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, which targets policies and practices that maintain the 'school-to-prison pipeline.' They were able to get a school board to stop using "willful defiance" (p. 108) as a reason to suspend students, as this had been disproportionately impacting boys of colour.

D) In order to make meaningful, lasting change, policy reforms are critical, and such reforms must actively engage young men and boys in the process.
The people who are most impacted by an issue should be driving reforms to address the issue. A good example is the End the

School-to-Jail Track campaign in Colorado, where parents and youth were engaged through 'Know Your Rights' workshops and parent groups offered by Padres & Jóvenes Unidos (PJU), the organization that coordinated the campaign. Parents and youth then gathered examples of the negative impacts of zero-tolerance policies on youth's lives and used this information to lobby for change. Because PJU was able to engage youth of colour, these students ended up leading the campaign; they attended policy negotiations and voiced their interests and concerns.

Not all communities may be ready to fully engage in action, and **organizations that hope to work with men and boys of colour should be ready to build capacity and commit to sharing ownership of any organized effort with stakeholders**. The authentic engagement of youth is labour- and time-intensive; a one-time event is not enough, and **a culture of engagement and advocacy must be built** with youth and communities over time to foster an understanding of how change happens. **Youth need to believe that change is possible and that they themselves can be part of bringing about change.** People organizing with youth should aim to instill this belief through their work.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?
For those working with men and boys of colour, this research urges **collaboration** and **coordination** across organizations, sectors, and institutions. In order to make an effective impact on the conditions that shape the possibilities available to youth of colour, those invested in improving outcomes must take **a collective impact approach** rather than work in silos. While individual programs and supports for youth are important, **working towards policy reform in partnership with youth may ultimately transform systems to better support boys and men of colour**. Moreover, interested youth workers can **foster youth capacity to engage in advocacy work** through programming that intentionally builds organizing skills and addresses issues that youth deem important.

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https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol7/iss3/9/

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