Lifting Up Our Kings: Developing Black Males in a Positive and Safe Space

Chris Chatmon and Richard Gray

An innovative program in California's Oakland School District focuses on changing the narrative about young African American males in order to radically change the outcome of their lives.

Positive, as opposed to punitive, discipline in public schools requires an environment that supports student and school staff capacity to restore, repair, and support relationships; build trust; hold individuals and groups accountable; and build the skills of students and school staff to make effective behavior and actions choices.

This shift in mindset can only take place when there is a change in school culture – the attitudes, customs, and beliefs in schools that often shape, impact, and even trump school codes, rules, and policies. African American males are three times more likely than their White male counterparts to be suspended or expelled in public schools. Changing these odds requires not only addressing disparities in discipline practices, but also lifting up a new narrative of hope, possibility, and brilliance so that young Black men can see and realize their potential.

In 2010, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) Superintendent Tony Smith, Oakland's Board of Education, the Urban Strategies Council, and the East Bay Community Foundation

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concluded that past efforts to improve the educational experiences and supports of African American male students in OUSD had changed little for this student population. They determined that real change would require a culture-shifting commitment by the school system. To institutionalize this commitment, OUSD launched the Office of African American Male Achievement (OAAMA), a bold project created to fundamentally improve academic and life outcomes for African American male students in Oakland, making OUSD the first district in the United States to create a department specifically to address the needs of African American male students.

Grounded in principles of reconciliation, love, healing, and identity, OAAMA Director Chris Chatmon and his colleagues have courageously and creatively cultivated new forms of interactions, relationships, rituals, and practices between young Black men, educators, parents, unions, district staff, community members, and organizations. Although deeply committed to the specific needs of African American males, OAAMA uses a theory of action called Targeted Universalism, which asserts that a system can be changed by embracing the concept of difference, identifying a problem (particularly one suffered by marginalized people), proposing a solution, and then broadening the scope of that solution to cover as many people as possible.[1] OAAMA believes transforming the system to support successful outcomes for OUSD's lowest performing subgroup will create a district that improves academic and social-emotional outcomes for all of its students.

1 For more on Targeted Universalism, see "The Importance of Targeted Universalism," by john a. powell, Stephen Menendian, and Jason Reece at http://www.prrac.org/full_text.php?text_id=1223&item_id=11577&newsletter_id=104.

I (Richard Gray) sat down with Chris to discuss the path and steps he has taken to create and sustain his program. We approached this conversation as two Black men who know these students' journeys firsthand, focusing on how Chris's program reaches, uplifts, and educates Black males. OAAMA's approach to changing the outcomes for young Black men in OUSD is centered on the belief that every interaction, no matter how small, impacts the culture and the lives of young people. In fact, it's these many, many small interactions that often matter the most.

Richard Gray: We often approach a lot of the issues that affect African American males and other vulnerable student populations from a deficit model. Is it important to start with the frame of success as a model as opposed to this deficit?

Chris Chatmon: The degree to which you see that the glass is half full or half empty pretty much determines your fate. At the Office of African American Male Achievement, we tend to enter into conversations about African American male students in this ecosystem around building off their innate greatness. So there's a fundamental assumption that all of these students, who we refer to as kings, are extraordinary, are brilliant beyond measure. It's up to me as the facilitator to help them be in a space where that can get lifted up, can be made manifest. In our work, there is a fundamental understanding that *they* are not the issue in the system; it's the system that sets up the structures and the culture and the principles and the practices that see the glass as half empty. And more times than not, these young men reciprocate that very deficit doom-and-gloom state of mind that the adult culture has manifested.

Richard Gray: Yes, exactly. So that sets the expectation, it sets a tone that the adults in this structure see me a certain

way, see me in terms of possibilities. And what is the kind of leadership capacity that's needed from educators to create that kind of learning environment? Do you find there are people who come by that naturally? Is it developed? Is it a combination of both?

Chris Chatmon: It's definitely a combination of both. I think it depends upon your point of entry into the system. Where it's teacher-led, it's actually identifying, recruiting, and training teachers that have a like mind, like spirit, who have that passion and purpose, who now want to align that with their profession. So that's not something that we have to develop per se, that kind of attitude. But then in the broader ecosystem it really is about bringing educators back to why they came into this work and understanding that this work is really around engaging our kings in relationship and understanding that they are extraordinary and brilliant. And that does take time. That takes unpacking. This is something that doesn't happen in one professional development; it doesn't happen in a year. But it's understanding that as educators, we're necessary, yet insufficient; that when we look at the data, we still are not where we need to be.

CULTIVATING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Richard Gray: Let's talk about that relationship because that's a key component, clearly, of education. Very often people see discipline in schools as an action, not an interaction – that it's, "This kid does something and I do something about that kid." I've found that where there is trouble with discipline, there's also trouble around relationships between young people and adults. Has that been your experience as well?

Chris Chatmon: Our theory of action in terms of engaging adults is: engage, encourage, and empower. Engage is about the value of relationships; our kids don't care what you know until they know that you care. When you're in a relationship with your students, you'll know how to differentiate the instruction to teach a child who may be more tactile or maybe more auditory or maybe more kinesthetic in learning. But it all comes with the understanding, appreciation, and value for relationships. As adults and students, the more I understand and know who you are and the more you know about me, the farther we can go regarding the content.

It makes such a difference when you have people with a true passion for teaching and youth development, who know that they are learning as much as they are teaching, and who are humble enough to know that when you reach conflict or disagreement, it's actually an opportunity for both people to learn. That's a way of thinking that we're trying to facilitate with regard to adult learning, but also regarding teaching our kids to understand who they are, how they show up, and how to articulate that in a way where they don't get triggered and react to someone who reacted to them – and because they're the student, they got kicked out.

Richard Gray: And so, if you start with this idea that relationship building is key, how would the process that you all use be different from a traditional structure with more punitive interventions?

Chris Chatmon: There are a variety of different strategies that we use, but really it starts with allowing our kings to speak the truth, to own their own stuff in such a way that whatever that student is feeling, that's not for us to debate. It's for us to understand so we can help coach, encourage, nudge, or redirect. And so a child comes to you based on how they deal with conflict, however real or raw they are. And it may be filled with cuss words and very animated. Now, we're going to step it down a notch, you know? "So now, how can you share that in a way, minus the cussing or tipping over a desk? What's another way that we could express or write or draw or share?" It's

all in the spirit of trying to understand why they're angry, but not letting that define them – they are not their behavior. How do I understand the behavior so that I can teach them another strategy or coach them through another way?

Some of that could be restorative practice, or through a writing exercise, or meditation and breathing techniques. Each of our instructors have many different ways of approaching that. But the thing that we try not to do is just react to the students and let their behavior become our behavior. But all of this goes back to the fact that we can activate these different strategies when we have a relationship. It goes back to the importance of using every opportunity that you have to interface with the king, even calling him a king, greeting him with a smile.

INSTILLING A POWERFUL COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Richard Gray: Tell me a little bit about the genesis of calling the young men "kings." You've used that term and it seems like it's a central part of an image you're trying to present to them. So tell me why you use the term king as a part of the process?

Chris Chatmon: The first year, when we started in 2010-2011, we interviewed over 800 kings from elementary to high school. Overwhelmingly, our students were saying that they were being experienced by adults as if they had done something wrong – this was just within the first month of school. Yet they did not have a voice, so they were going through the school day, the school week, never having an opportunity to talk to the adults on the campus about how they were feeling, how they were doing, what their goals or values were, who they wanted to be. What we realized is that our kings did not feel valued.

And so using a word that was an endearment – it was powerful. What they had been hearing, was just the opposite of king. Like, "You ain't gonna be nobody; put your head up, pull your pants up." There was all this charge and emotion and hate and anger, and after a while, these kids end up mirroring and manifesting the same. So the king piece was saying, "Nah, king, hold your head up." Elevate their minds, and we know our kings will elevate their pants.

Additionally, there's one thing with the adult-to-student culture, but then you have the student-to-student culture. Sometimes we say street culture is more prevalent and more real than school culture, but we're like, "No, no, no, we've got to break all that down."

And one of the ways to break it down was referring to everyone using the word love, using the word king. Using these words means that we as brothers support each other. We don't break each other down; we build each other up. And then students are able to support each other through those highs and lows, through those real time things that happen in the community, practicing the principles of brotherhood. So the word king is a power word, an endearing word that allows our students to see themselves as royalty, someone with power and presence.

TARGETED UNIVERSALISM

Richard Gray: There clearly is an acknowledgement that there's a racial disparity in how African American males are disciplined in the public education system. But I have found that there is either a resistance or at least an aversion sometimes to taking a race-specific solution to this. People say, yes, it's a problem for African American males, but you can't create a program that's just for them because it's exclusionary. And so how do you

navigate that? I know you've talked about this concept of targeted universalism, so I'm curious about how you balance the focus just on the kings?

Chris Chatmon: I try to make sure that folks have an understanding of the theory of action behind targeted universalism. And that's acknowledging that we're all located very differently in systems. We've used the data as a way to show why we focus on the needs of Black boys. But if we're able to identify best practices for those students who've been furthest away from opportunity, those best practices can impact everybody in the system. And so it doesn't stop us from supporting Latino, Chicano, or African American girls or any other subgroups.

But if we just continue to do the universal and not go to those folks who are on the margin and/or who are not getting their needs met, then you end up perpetuating the same outcome. In particular in settings that are not with people of color, I don't think it's a good strategy to lead with disparities. Instead, I'm always trying to lead with story and leave people with hope, with aspiration, and to lift up solutions that support African American male students.

Richard Gray: Is there a particular time when you had a targeted strategy for African American males, and then it was applied to a broader context?

Chris Chatmon: When we do our Man Up conference, we have Latino-Chicano and indigenous brothers and European Americans who attend some of our conferences. One recent conference was targeted and focused on and grounded in African history. There was an initial apprehension with folks who didn't identify as Black in the beginning. But by the end of the day, there was this extraordinary feeling of brotherhood, of community, through this shared experience of creating a drum and then for an hour drumming – and then the process of the dialogue and having food together. I think it was through the shared experience that we ended up seeing ourselves in each other. But the whole focus and content and context was grounded in the Black experience.

Another example is something we did at a school around addressing disproportionate suspension rates. Our kings were telling us that the adults on campus were afraid of them and didn't talk to them. And when they did engage them, they engaged them as if they'd done something wrong. So we asked teachers to go out into the hallway and to greet every brother they saw, to call them by their name, and give them a compliment. And we found this had implications not just on the student receiving the compliment, but even on that adult in being much more aware of putting out into the universe a light of positivity and engagement. And anecdotally, the feedback we've heard from teachers in the school is that tardies were actually going down. I can't say it was just that factor alone, but folks around the school were feeling it was more positive. And initially, it was intentionally around engaging, encouraging, empowering Black boys. But it was a school of only about 33 percent Black students, and that targeted practice actually was modeled and mirrored throughout the school.

EMBRACING STUDENTS' IDENTITY IN CONTENT AND PRACTICE

Richard Gray: I think we're sort of expanding the notion of what Black is now. I'm curious about this notion of what it even means to be an African American male. What's the level of diversity in your work, and how does that play out in your own school and your own context?

Chris Chatmon: You have Latino-Chicano brothers that are dark in skin

color but identify as Latino-Chicano and vice versa. Within the Oakland Unified School District, 600 is the code for Black or African American. But how students identify with it may be Black, it may be Creole, it may be Dominican, Puerto Rican, it may be indigenous. One of our goals was making sure that kids identified as 600 no longer showed up as the lowest in graduation rates, disproportionately represented suspensions, chronically absent – all of these negative factors. When you looked at the code and then the data, we saw that we needed to focus on African American male achievement.

Content-wise, it's much bigger than that though. The reason we have a lot of disparate educational outcomes is because the predominant narrative in public schools across the nation is a White narrative, and it perpetuates this internalized depression because you never really see yourself in any of the content with the exception of very specific points in time, and usually from a deficit or from a superior/not superior standpoint. And for us, we're trying to shift the system by lifting up the narrative from pre-K all the way through twelfth grade so that our history collectively shows up in all the four subjects and across all the other content areas.

And that is a heavy push. We have actually been writing curriculum. In California, the focus is the A-G entrance requirements for public universities, so we now have three history courses, we have two English language arts courses, and we have one elective course written. And we're partnering with Stanford University to submit a math and science course written from the African perspective. We're creating our career pathways grounded in the African perspective.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY COMPETENCE

Richard Gray: A lot of educators may not have the culture competence and are not trained to do this kind of work. Is that something that you have to do within your own structure? Is there a process to help them know how to build those relationships in ways that are going to be effective?

Chris Chatmon: I would say that our teacher prep programs, our college prep programs, have to do a better job at developing the next generation of teacher leaders to understand the social context that they're teaching in. And the way that you do that isn't just landing on a quality lesson plan; you should actually spend time in your students' communities on a weekend or in the evening. Here in Oakland, if a teacher took the time to go to Greenman Field to watch Little League, they would gain extraordinary knowledge and insight into the families and the community. You would see multiple students. You would see fathers and grandfathers and uncles and aunties. You just see a whole other layer of the community. We find that the teachers who have reached the highest academic goals and objectives with students actually take the time to understand who their young people are.

In doing that, you're asset mapping. Every community has value, has assets, and we're at our best when we're aware of that and we're connecting that. For example, principals should know all of the assets in and around their physical school, so when things come up, they can lean on those assets to support a child, to support a family, to support a teacher, to support their school community. And if a teacher doesn't have that capacity, then you can elevate a parent to be that broker, that liaison. You can identify your attendance clerk or a school security officer to play that role as well. But it is something that is of value to classroom teachers and the entire school.

MOVING FROM POCKETS OF EXCELLENCE TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Richard Gray: So what are the kinds of supports that are needed if we want to take this to scale? We want an educator to have a positive relationship with this African American male student, a classroom that supports that relationship, a school that supports that classroom, and we want a system that supports all of that. What are the things that are necessary and the right kind of support structure that will allow for that to be the norm rather than the exception?

Chris Chatmon: Great question. When you roll out the strategy, you need to make sure you're doing that with students, parents, teachers, principals, central office – and through policy. It takes leadership at every level. It takes somebody having the audacity to say, "We're necessary, yet insufficient," and having the courage to envision: "What would a great school, a great district, a great classroom, look like, smell like, sound like?"

We have to give people permission to see that what we have isn't good enough. And if we're going to get there, we have to look to each other. There's not going to be some massive amount of resources all of a sudden. But what we do collectively is far greater than what we can do individually.

The other piece we did is spotlight where good things are happening. You know, great instruction is happening every day for Black boys, and it's happening with White teachers, Latino teachers, male, female, Black teachers. A lot of times, though, our narrative doesn't lift that up. There's some good teaching. Shine the light on that. And then we activate that agency and those influencers.

You know, when I started five years ago, again I was a staff of one. No one handed me a blueprint. Now I have a team. We've got some policy. We've increased graduation rates for Black male cohorts by 17 percent. And we've reduced suspension rates by 43 percent as a system – not as a school, but as a system. And that was a heavy push around culture and around relationship. I mean, policy means nothing if you don't have the people that value why that policy is even there.

YOUNG MEN OF COLOR AND AMERICA'S FUTURE

Richard Gray: You just mentioned the context in which you started, and I think I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about the uniqueness of what's been happening culturally and socially in this country, particularly as it pertains to Black males. We've had what I think is an increased recognition around Black men's interactions with police. And we've got this heightened awareness now of the impact of cultural elements like the confederate flag.

So I'm wondering if you see this as the unique time for us to be able to have a cultural shift about issues like institutional racism and its impact on African American males?

Chris Chatmon: Oh, for sure. We're at an extraordinary moment in time where having conversations around the needs of Black boys, it's not just something that's happening here, it's happening across the nation. And so I think from multiple standpoints, we have the momentum to move into a different narrative that doesn't problematize or demonize Black and Brown, but actually celebrates and elevates the contributions of those who historically have been marginalized. So I think it is a good time. It's a blessing to be in this position at this point of time, as a father and as an educator.

For more on OUSD's Office of African American Male Achievement, see http://www.ousd.org/aama.