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Karl Is Ready! Why Aren't You? Promoting Social and Cultural Skills in Early Childhood Education

The authors argue that culturally competent teachers responsive to Black boys' culture and ways of being can ensure school success for this group of students.

Karl—bright, inquisitive, vibrant, and full of possibilities—was born in 2011 and will enter kindergarten in 2016 ready to learn and explore the four Rs: reading, writing, arithmetic, and race. At the age of 4, he is academically and cognitively advanced. He has an extensive vocabulary (most people think he is 6 or 7 years old) and is advanced in math, including adding and subtracting in his head (without counting on fingers). Karl can count past 100 and knows all letters of the alphabet (upper and lower case), spells his name, knows all colors (primary, secondary, and tertiary). He loves books and demands that his family read to him. Karl is more than ready for school. Also important to note is that Karl speaks openly about skin color. Thus, he is academically and culturally advanced. When playing a video game with family, he was asked to choose his character. Karl chose the darkest shade, yet his skin tone is light (a caramel shade). His family was pleased to see this Black boy recognizing skin color and doing so in a positive and prideful way. What would teachers (the majority of whom are White) have said or done, if anything? Are they comfortable talking about race with young children? Are they competent doing so? What resources will they use? Will Karl encounter expectations at odds with his social-cultural development? In the sections that follow, the authors aim to respond to these questions important for determining what African American boys need to thrive and what those who teach them need to know and do in order to support their development of a positive self-identity.

We begin with a focus on the changing demographics of early childhood education, followed by a critique of the practice of "school readiness," specifically how the criteria of readiness (for whom and what?) historically and currently tend to marginalize

much of what African American children learn in their homes and communities as irrelevant to school readiness. To elaborate, we argue that schools frequently expect children and their families to be "ready" for schools, ignoring (perhaps unintentionally) how they, too, need to be "ready" to engage children and their families from culturally, linguistically, and economically different backgrounds. We conclude with a focus on the importance of preparing early childhood teachers to recognize, understand, and promote the social and cultural skills of African American children in general, boys in particular. The three Rs are essential but not enough to support culturally different students.

Introduction

The "face" of kindergarten classrooms changed with the entering class of 2016 representing mostly students of color. Some 52% of kindergarteners in this year were non-White. This demographic shift calls for associated changes in teacher preparation, specifically the requisite knowledge, skills, and appropriate dispositions necessary to be culturally competent in the early childhood education classroom. For instance, 99% of teachers in early childhood education are female (Saluja, Early, & Glifford, 2002), and the majority are White. These percentages are not predicted to change in the near future (Kena et al., 2015). This high number of female and White early childhood teachers alone raises an important question: What happens when boys are educated almost exclusively by women who may favor (unbeknownst to them) a feminized curriculum and may not be trained to understand boys' needs in general, Black boys in particular? Evidence of this lack of training and understanding has been documented in the seminal works of Hale (1982) and Kunjufu (1985), and more recently by Barbarin and Crawford (2006), who argue that some teachers have difficulty establishing emotionally close relationships with children who are culturally and socioeconomically different from them. This cultural, gender, and socioeconomic mismatch does not bode well for the Karls in our schools. Likewise, nor does it bode well for educators who will likely have deficit-oriented views and hyper-focus on problems (real and/or imagined) rather than promises and possibilities. Even well-intentioned teachers and school personnel, meaning those who want to be effective with all students, may encounter difficulties in being responsive to children from racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds (Wright, Counsell, & Tate, 2015).

In general, teachers are faced with learning to recognize and appreciate the social and cultural practices of children who say and do things in ways they either do not know how to value or find confusing. When the latter happens, boys as a whole, Black boys in particular, are perceived as failing to respond in the desired ways with respect to school readiness skills (e.g., "maturity"). Over time, these same teachers distance themselves emotionally, thus confusing their lack of familiarity with the social and cultural practices of African American boys as deficits vis-à-vis strengths to cultivate and encourage. Consequently, when teachers fail to recognize, understand, and engage the social and cultural strengths of Black boys, they begin to develop negative ideas about their motivation and abilities (i.e., school readiness). This is tantamount to blaming the victim and undermining African American boys' adaptation to and success in school. Teachers must be skilled in the traditional and foundational three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic). This is critical to their school success. Just as important is the fourth R: Race. In this diverse nation and in these increasingly diverse schools, teachers must become culturally competent, which consists of knowledge, skills, and appropriate dispositions to work effectively with Black students and other children of color. As depicted in Appendix A, culturally responsive education includes teachers' philosophies about working with Karl and other students of color, how they promote a culturally responsive learning environment, creating relevant and multicultural curriculum, adapting teaching styles to learning styles, and selecting the most fair and least biased instruments.

Responding to Demographic Changes in Early Childhood Education Classrooms

Early childhood education classroom demographics are rapidly changing and continue to have a significant impact on teacher preparation. For example, helping both pre- and in-service teachers develop a clear sense of their cultural identities in relation to the students they will teach is a key first step in awareness of how notions of race, class, gender, ability, and disability affect their teaching and students' learning. Therefore, since the demographic reality is one of an increasingly diverse student population (with a homogeneous teaching population), teacher preparation that pays attention to teacher efficacy and the importance of understanding teaching, learning, and schooling in relation to notions of race, class, gender, ability, and disability is essential to be ready for the Karls of the world.

There are complex connections between racial-ethnic identity, gender, and academic achievement for even our youngest learners. This is especially true for African American boys , for whom race and gender tend to limit their educational experiences and opportunities (Wright et al., 2015). McKown and Weinstein (2008) demonstrated that teacher bias—evidenced by teachers treating children of equivalent academic abilities differently based on the children's racial-ethnic status—accounted for nearly one third of a standard deviation of such differences in educational achievement over the course of one academic year. African American males, excessively and unjustly disciplined for minor infractions, are overlooked in the readiness notion of "second chances" or "time-outs" given generously to other groups—notably, middle-class White males and females.

Preparing teachers to recognize, understand, and support the early development of positive (i.e., culturally responsive) schooling and racial identities among African American boys is critical to their sense of belonging and, thus, overall school success. For example, Wright, Counsell, and Tate (2015) assert that "positive racial identities among African American boys contribute strongly to high academic achievement" (p. 25) and, therefore,

cannot be ignored in teacher preparation, which is also urged by Whiting (2006, 2009). Moreover, a strong sense of in-group affiliation and identification with one's racial-ethnic group is associated with academic achievement, which can be positive or negative depending on the context and preparedness of the teacher to work effectively with children from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. It goes without saying, then, that school readiness can no longer simply be about how ready children and their families are for school. It must also include just how ready teachers are for the growing and complex diversity found in classrooms across the nation. Before we can begin to address teacher readiness, attention must be given to the genesis of school readiness as a stable practice in preK-K programs.

School Readiness for Whom and for What?

Accountability pressures (i.e., The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, or NCLB) have created a skill-driven, teach-to-the-test environment whereby young children are made to sit for long periods of time filling out worksheets rather than listening to stories, counting with real objects, or engaging in project-based learning about their community helpers (we will await the impact

of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act to see how Black boys fare in school). In some kindergarten classes, children receive red marks on their coloring assignments when they fail to stay within the lines, which, based on school readiness, is (mis)attributed to their short attention span to finish such a task. These practices and the punitive consequences are in direct contrast to the more developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) of having children draw their own pictures and explore how combining different paints (red and yellow) results in other colors (i.e., orange). Because NCLB demands were created to cover more material, teachers often resorted to teaching by rote memorization to meet the expected quota at the expense of high quality teaching and learning that is developmentally appropriate and rigorous. These practices were carried out, despite teachers' knowledge of child development research, which says that 5-year-old children learn from play and concrete, hands-on experiences. As a result, many teachers have provided fewer opportunities for children to learn about measuring at the water table or about addition in the context of playing "store" (having a business) because these activities take "too much time" - or worse still, because public constituencies see "playing" as a waste of instructional time. Restricting children to

seat work undermines their development, specifically their natural curiosity to explore and actualize big ideas about their cultural worlds of home and school. It also conflicts with the vervistic (high energy) and movement-oriented (tactile and kinesthetic) preferences and styles of some African Americans (Boykin, 1982).

The consequences of not fully understanding school readiness through cultural lenses contribute sharply to increased rates of kindergarten retention and special education disproportionately among boys of color, especially African American boys. Against this "scientific authority" often blindly attributed to school readiness skills are the social and cultural practices of African American boys, often judged to be inadequate and deficient. The decision to declare African American boys disproportionately unready (i.e., assignment to level 1 or developmental kindergarten) has more to do with teachers who do not understand the out-of-school ways of talking and knowing of this population and how their ways of talking and knowing actually carry academic value.

School officials often believe and parents are often convinced that kindergarten retention and other extra-year programs like pre-K and pre-first provide more appropriate curricula (unavailable in the regular grades) and "protect" unready

children from the aversive experiences of a high-pressure first grade. Still, boys of color, African American boys in particular, seem to suffer the most by such practices that tend to marginalize much of what they learn in their homes and communities as irrelevant to school. Children from low-income and racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged by this narrowness inasmuch as school readiness tests often fail to recognize and adopt, in any culturally responsive way, the potentially positive interactive and adaptive verbal and interpretive cultural practices learned by African American boys (as well as other non-mainstream groups) within families and communities.

Challenging Teachers' Perceptions of School Readiness

Growing evidence supports the perceptions of teachers' objectives and/or less than impartial views of school readiness tests (Gurian, 2011). Teachers tend to conclude from a single test that a child or groups of children are too immature for kindergarten. Criteria used to make this "objective" determination include, for instance: (1) attention span is too short to finish a task, such as cutting and pasting together a Valentine; (2) fine motor skills are insufficiently developed so they cannot cut on a wiggly line or tear paper; (3) language spoken in incomplete or immature sentences, such as "Me go to school," shows lack of intelligence; and (4) social skills are deficient when students refuse to share toys and prized possessions with other children, including classmates. These and other readiness skills suggest that children who enter school without minimal academic and social competencies are at an increased risk of repeating kindergarten. Evidence for the interconnectedness of socio-emotional and academic school readiness is documented in a re-analysis of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, where researchers report that children with higher behavioral regulation appear better able to attend to specific cues, remember instruction, stay on task, tune out irrelevant information, and process information necessary to complete tasks, all of which contribute to the ability to succeed in school settings and perform well academically (Sektnana, McClellanda, Acocka, & Morrison, 2010). Teachers perceive this to be an accurate and unquestioned predictor of school readiness (academic) and social and emotional maturation of readiness. The problem with such a perception is the limitations of traditional measures that often fall short of offering a complete and accurate picture of the intellectual, communicative, and cultural

styles of culturally diverse children in general, and African American boys in particular (Wright & Ford, 2016). Some scholars warn that the traditional measures of achievement (e.g., giftedness) are problematic because they fail to account for all aspects of school, such as contributing factors to inequality, placing an over-reliance on testing outcomes, and defining intelligence based on limited constructs (Ford, 2011, 2013).

As with other scholars, we challenge the past and present perceptions of teachers regarding the objectivity of traditional school readiness tests. We subscribe to the idea that, in order to accurately capture the intellectual prowess that resides within all children, but especially African American boys, approaches to determining what students know requires teachers to be intentional in their desire and ability to respond to the cultural and linguistic differences, beliefs, and practices of the students and their families. Such approaches must go beyond the ability to "color within the lines" to include a focus on early leadership skills, creative and artistic ability, initiative in participating in classroom activities (e.g., dramatic play), risk taking (show and tell), persuasive speaking, consensus building, and resiliency.

Finally, and equally important, when teachers are taught and required to examine the ways in which testing has been used to establish and reinforce racial hierarchies, they cannot ignore, trivialize, or discount the intersections of race, intelligence, and testing as a practice not necessarily tied to individual aptitude, but instead to previous exposure to certain types of information that tends to reflect the ways of knowing and being of White middle-class children (Helms, 2010, 2012).

What Does This Mean for African American Boys and Their Readiness?

In light of our critique of school readiness and teacher perceptions of school readiness tests, there is no denying that many believe that such knowledge and skills are essential for achieving school success. Moreover, they believe that if these skills are not mastered, African American boys may not be prepared for kindergarten and/or may not be promoted to first grade. However, what happens to the African American boy who does not exhibit these characteristics, such as Karl? Does the teacher take a genuine interest and work with parents to build on the strengths of their home and community to integrate into the school environment? Or are these children, Black boys, simplistically and unjustly viewed as unready for kindergarten because they lack (or are perceived to lack) so-called basic social competencies?

According to proponents of school readiness tests, children who perform poorly on these tests of exposure to certain types of information are more likely than their peers to cause distractions, face difficulties in forming positive peer relationships, and experience challenges adjusting to academic settings. Students who do not have minimal desired school-based social competencies may become distracted and unable to focus on the curriculum presented. Since it does not appear that existing school readiness tests are going away or being interrogated via a cultural framework, how do we prevent African American boys from falling behind their peers, possibly losing interest in school and otherwise becoming unmotivated and disengaged? We know that such a loss of interest so early in their lives carries potent implications for the next 12 years of schooling. Thus, it is urgent to prevent disengagement for all young children. This sense of urgency is greater with African American boys given how often they perform lower than all other students in school settings (Alliance for Quality Education, 2013). We believe that many African American students, like Karl, are indeed ready for schools. We also recognize that some teachers, based on the fourth R (race), may not be ready for the "Karls" in their classes.

Promoting Social and Cultural Skills Is an Opportunity and Obligation

Our nation's schools face new opportunities and challenges due to achievement and opportunity gaps, high stakes testing, educational reforms, standards-based education, and more. Schools are expected and obligated to meet the educational needs of all children, regardless of their backgrounds and experiences. Teachers cannot choose their students; like it or not, they will be in classrooms of children with increasingly different needs. We are cognizant that growing pressures to raise academic standards and assess all students' progress toward meeting standards place a greater burden on educators pressed to teach content and ensure that students pass tests.

Reform efforts to increase cultural competence and teacher efficacy tend to become less of a priority amid the mandate to cover material at the expense of learning. When the latter is the case, the early academic trajectories of African American boys hang in the balance, placing them at risk of failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). How do we prepare African American boys and their families for school readiness without marginalizing what they learn in their homes and communities? We begin with preparing teachers to respond to cultural styles and linguistic differences.

The Teacher as Catalyst

Teacher preparation can and must provide examples of cultural modeling that recognizes, understands and integrates what children learn in their homes and communities as adaptive in the classroom environment (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Irvine, 2003, Lee, 2007). However, this can only be achieved when teacher educators themselves are culturally competent to scaffold for teacher candidates. To address the needs of Karl and other non-White students, teacher cultural competence is non-negotiable. Indeed, simply having a "heroes and holidays" lesson or activity is not sufficient to preparing teachers to meet the needs of today's diverse children and their families (Banks, 2015; Ford, 2011). While many teacher preparation programs require their candidates to read about how to strategically integrate culturally responsive teaching and learning practices into their classrooms, such practices and strategies are meaningless if teachers have not examined their own attitudes, beliefs, and values, and how these manifest in teaching, learning, and schooling. Thus, the challenge is not simply ensuring that this is done in a manner pedagogically sound and relevant to the students' needs. Rather, teachers must receive adequate training and preparation and embrace such practices in their daily instructional delivery and in their management of the multicultural/multi-ethnic classroom climate. It also requires accountability, someone overseeing the work that must be done to effect culturally responsive changes.

Social Skills of Home and School

Researchers have discussed the link between social interactions and interpersonal skills among peers as a determinant and critical attribute for success in kindergarten and how best to support integration of such skills. Extant literature has noted that a child's interpersonal skills influence social and academic development during the critical stages of school entry and maturation (e.g., Boutte, 2015; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Wright & Ford, 2016). These studies build on the work of Blair and Razza (2007) and Raver (2002), who assert that emotions matter in relation to academics and that integrating cognition and emotion results in models that substantially advance our culturally-based understanding of school readiness and academic achievement for kindergarten students through early elementary school. As previously noted, a number of studies show a strong link between the home and school culture of students. This link is especially strong with regard to the positive relationship between African American boys'

out-of-school experiences and eventual academic achievement. As a result, researchers are fine-tuning the explanations for why teachers must be attuned to not only the home-school connection, but also to the social and emotional development of children in order to provide high-quality learning experiences for all children, especially African American boys, to thrive.

The motivation for learning and adjusting to the norms of the school routine can come from peers, teachers, and others with whom the child comes in contact. It is, therefore, critical that children be given opportunities to develop positive relationships and react within a variety of circumstances in order to become well adjusted in preparation for high quality kindergarten programs that respond to the cultural and linguistic differences of all children (Wright et al., 2015). The sense of urgency to ensure that African American children thrive in the early grades is most pressing for Black boys *and* girls given that they tend to not perform as well as their White classmates (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014).

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights' 2015 Taskforce Report, 71% of White children entering kindergarten could recognize letters, compared with 57% of African American children. Relatedly, more than 140,000 kindergarten students nationwide were held back a year during school year 2013–14, representing about 4% of all kindergarten students in public schools. Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Native Alaskan students are held back each year at nearly twice the rate of White children. The significance of these retention data lies in the need for teachers to work culturally, both responsively and responsibly, in support of working effectively with (particularly African American) children and families given these statistics. The implications for understanding these data is significant as it must inform how to incorporate culturally, linguistically, and academically sound practices to eliminate this achievement gap, opportunity gap, and education debt.

Moreover, far too many reports fail to adequately address the root cause of why African American boys encounter teachers who perceive them to be unprepared for early childhood education programs. As stated throughout this article, integrating the language, culture, and family frames of reference and other social-emotional practices to support and enhance African American boys' social skills development is absolutely critical if teachers are going to be ready for the inquisitive and vibrant Karls of the world. Since numbers do have a way of

dehumanizing the situation, there is no shortage of reports on Black boys in preK-12 indicating a prevalence of deficit thinking, suggesting that this population lacks the social and academic skills to effectively compete in schools.

This misguided thinking is further supported by the perceived absence of simple skills, like remembering to raise a hand to be recognized to speak and following directions or completing tasks. Consequently, failure to complete tasks believed to demonstrate school readiness prevents an alarming number of African American boys from engaging in the learning process. This raises an important question regarding what is really preventing such an alarming number of African American boys from being fully engaged in the learning process. Is it simply failure to demonstrate the requisite social skills, or are other factors (e.g., race and gender) also at work? We believe it is the latter.

African American Boys and Social Skills

Home and cultural out-of-school practices (e.g., ways with words, interactional styles) that African American boys bring to their schooling must be recognized, understood, and integrated early in their academic experiences in authentic, positive, and culturally responsive ways within learning environments (recall Appendix A). This valuing of the social-emotional-cultural skillsets, when recognized, valued, and integrated, prepare these students for positive learner outcomes. In addition, such affirming early childhood learning environments provide support for traditional academic readiness and expand the notion of what it means to be "ready for school." This is achieved when value is placed on children's home culture and when strategic attempts are made to determine how these assets can be transferred to the school environment, thus making learning relevant by connecting teachers to the expressive interactional styles of African American boys, as well as the quality of their peer interactions and the ability to reason, problem solve, and get along with others (Raver, 2002). Just as these social-emotional-cultural skills are fundamental for children in general to learn and retain social and academic concepts introduced, so too is the importance of valuing the diverse practices of African American boys.

Evidence for the interconnectedness of social, emotional, cultural, and academic school readiness is supported by another re-analysis of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (Sektnana, McClellanda, Acocka, & Morrison, 2010).

Studies like the NICHD study linking positive emotions to achievement show that joy, hope, and pride positively correlate with academic self-efficacy, academic interest and effort, and overall achievement (Pekrun et al., 2004). For African American boys, social interactions and engagement with self, teachers, and peer groups is tantamount to the cultural belief of the importance of community, which is why it is imperative that they not be indirectly encouraged not to bring the whole of who they are into the learning environment. Constructing meaningful experiences that value and nurture the whole child with respect to African American boys' development must be an ongoing dialogue with both school personnel and families. Like all students, male African American students must feel secure enough to join in play, ask questions, and listen to and be heard by both peers and adults. Their preparedness for kindergarten and their later school success are related to multiple aspects of their development, including social development, cognitive skills, approaches to learning, and cultural skill navigation (Wright et al., 2015).

African American Boys and Cultural Skill Navigation

While socio-emotional development and social skills acquisition for readiness are important, the same can be true for the development of cultural competence and awareness with respect to the differences in others. Children are not born thinking about race, skin color, and differences. However, are young children curious about racial, physical, and cultural characteristics? According to the work of Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), children begin to see racial differences as early as age 2.5. For this reason, it is important that children understand the importance of cultural skill navigation. Understanding the school landscape is important for early learners. They must understand that differences exist and, while they bring their own values, beliefs, and home culture to the classroom, others do as well. Understanding that this is the case seems to come easier for some than for others. For instance, children from non-dominant or historically marginalized populations tend to learn such lessons sooner than those who have grown up with multiple forms of privilege and entitlement. It is well documented that those on the margins are most acutely aware of how they are positioned in relation to others. To illustrate further the notion of positionality, children who have been assigned to the low performing reading group are aware of those in the high performing reading group. This practice of "tracking" students based on ability tends to circumscribe the schooling

experience of African American boys, positioning them early in situations wherein they must learn navigational skills in order to survive settings that may not always understand and embrace their cultural practices (Oakes, 2005). For this reason, the need for culturally competent teachers is critical to the success of African American boys' ability to negotiate and navigate their cultural worlds of home and school.

The Need for Culturally Competent Early Childhood Educators

In *Teaching 2030*, Berry (2011) states that "educators must prepare themselves to meet every learner in an expanding educational free market, leveraging their teaching skills as wise and caring guides" (p. 3). What does this mean as it relates to African American boys within the realm of school readiness? Most educators would agree that the term "high needs" is generally used in reference to schools located in low-performing areas, often in the inner city, often serving children of color. Deficit thinking in studies promotes the thinking that students in these areas are incapable of mastering school readiness and success. However, we argue for asset-based thinking with regard to Black children in general, African American boys in particular. When teachers are prepared to see assets and strengths versus deficits, they in turn are

better able to support the families of the children they work with and see the cultural wealth of communities (Yosso, 2005).

Recommendations: Getting Ready for African American Boys

We end this paper with a focus on school readiness—not for African Americans boys, but for teachers working with them. Are schools ready for Karl and other boys of color? Getting ready to be culturally competent, per Appendix A, starts with philosophy (e.g., expectations, a desire to teach and be effective, a positive regard for culture and associated differences and similarities, etc.). Teachers must recognize the need to be culturally competent and then take action to do so in order to ensure that the learning environment (e.g., relationships), curriculum, instruction, and assessment are culturally relevant, fair, bias-reduced, engaging, and more. Teachers must be willing to examine their own socio-cultural histories and not display such shallow understandings of students of color, namely African American boys. When teachers are able to undergo this type of self- examination, they become cognizant of their own complex cultural identities to develop a "cultural eye" and be willing to challenge the assumption of others (Irvine, 2003). Collectively, these factors contribute to classrooms that are equitable,

rigorous, and full of high expectations, making this an equitable foundation for culturally responsive teaching.

Becoming a high-quality teacher entails formal and informal education. College classes, degrees, professional development, and in-service workshops are essential. Reading widely about African American boys is necessary. Understanding language is significant, and binary terms such as "same" and "different" must be replaced with more identifiable and affirmative language when discussing identities. While teachers may think engaging in the practice of "colorblindness" is acceptable, they must understand that such a simplification negates the notion of race, a salient factor in the identities of African American boys. These suggestions provide knowledge and understanding but are not sufficient. Teachers must go further by immersing themselves in the cultures of their children, families, and communities (e.g., home visits, attending family celebrations and community events, perhaps living in the community). Being an integral part of the community shortens cultural bridges and provides context and experiences that cannot be captured in books and lectures. This resonates with the family and community as the teacher is actively and authentically making an effort to connect within the personal landscape of their students. Teachers are empowered and enlightened to see strengths and potential in Black boys; they learn to interpret behaviors, including problems, through the eyes of their students, too many of whom are misunderstood. Referrals for discipline, suspension, and special education (e.g., developmental delay) decrease. Conversely, referrals for gifted education classes and services, competitions, and awards increase. Getting ready for school is not just for students; teachers must also get ready for school. This is what the Karls in our classrooms want and deserve; this is what their families expect and hope for and, quite frankly, must demand.

Conclusion

Much evidence supports the belief that, prior to students' entering early education and care programs, certain foundational skills need to be in place to ensure mastery of school-level concepts. These skills cannot be at the expense of what children learn in their homes and communities. There must a concerted effort on the part of schools to recognize, understand, value, and integrate the cultural and social skills that African American boys bring to their schooling experiences, the familiar and unfamiliar, if they are to be ready for Karl. Teachers cannot be culturally responsive if they do not acknowledge such

cultural capital. Many future teachers may use human "sameness" to resist the need to be culturally responsive, but in doing so, they neglect attending to the authentic and individual needs of the whole child.

Attending to the whole African American male child must include attention to physical well-being, social development, cultural development, cognitive skills and knowledge, and the manner in which he approaches learning. These are all factors contributing to the chances for African American boys to thrive in school, thus changing the existing narrative too often riddled with negative experiences and outcomes, regardless of age, over-representation in special education and disciplinary issues (suspension and expulsion), and under-representation in gifted education. These types of miseducation many times mistaken for lack of school readiness are used against African American boys as soon as they enter the formal school settings and, worse, long before they have had an opportunity to demonstrate who they are, independent of stereotypes such as "bad boy" and "trouble maker." In an attempt to restore for African American boys the innocence of childhood that they are frequently denied on the basis of race and gender under the guise of being "unready," we take a preventative, growth mindset, and anti-deficit approach, arguing that teachers who are culturally competent, teachers who understand, affirm, and are responsive to Black males' culture and ways of being, can disrupt these negative experiences and ensure school success and help restore their right to childhood—a right given to White children. Educators must view African American boys and their families more consistently as resource-rich and full partners in support of their educations. Unlike many, we urge school personnel and all those who care about Black boys to focus on potential, on what Black boys can do rather than what they purportedly cannot do. In so doing, educators are ready for young Black boys in pre-k through kindergarten and beyond.

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Appendix A: From Cultural Clashes with School Readiness to Culturally Responsive Strength-Based Practices Approach

SCHOOL READINESS	AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE	CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE RECOMMENDATIONS
Sits quietly	Movement oriented and Vervistic (may be considered immature and lacking self-control)	Encourage indoor and outdoor large motor and whole body experiences, such as putting mats in spacious areas to encourage boys (and girls) to tumble and roll
Follow rules	Expressive individualism; creative, risk taker (May be considered defiant and disrespectful)	Create opportunities for spontaneous and continuous exploration of "What if…" questions
Draws within the lines	Expressive individualism – creative; imaginative; thinks outside the box (May be viewed as lacking manual dexterity, delayed fine motor skills, and immature)	Observe closely with a strength-based lens and note three things that you noticed that you may not have seen previously
Knows first and last name	Expressive individualism – likes to make up names, including nicknames (May be viewed as immature, learning disability or unintelligent)	Supports children's initiative and curiosity about their own interests and the world around them
Listen when others talk, especially teacher	Oral tradition - call and response (May be viewed as rude and disrespectful)	Uses cultural strengths, such as oral traditions in African American communities, to develop emergent reading and writing skills
Do not question or challenge authority figures	Oral tradition – blunt and direct (May be viewed as rude and a bad or troubled child)	Acknowledges the legitimacy of cultural heritages as legacies that affect children's dispositions and attitudes and are worthy curriculum content

Quiet when working	Oral tradition – enjoys talking and expressing self in all contexts (May talk during all assignments, even assessments)	Think about the early learning environment and how it meets needs and reflects strengths
Independent	Communal – interdependent, social, and extraverted (May be perceived as lacking independence)	What strengths appear and how can they be leveraged?
Shares	Communal – strong affiliation to loved ones first (May not share with those they don't trust)	Explicit about respecting diverse cultures, experiences, and practices
Takes responsibility	Communal – protective of friends and loved ones. (May get in trouble helping and taking up for others)	Use the home culture and learning as a positive platform on which to build learning

D.Y. Ford and B.L. Wright (12/2015)