Project **MALES**

Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success

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Seven Justice-Oriented Principles for Men of Color Working with Boys of Color

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, educational stakeholders have sought to address the hardships experienced by boys of color by recruiting and retaining more men of color into the field of education. While men of color educators offer an array of benefits to students, there are also compelling critiques of the rationale undergirding the “positive male role model” approach. These critiques assert that popular notions of role modeling advance individualist, deficit-based, and patriarchal imaginations of educational success. This practice brief aims to support men of color educators by mapping out seven justice-oriented principles to help educators avoid confining notions of role modeling that threaten to co-opt their work with young people.

KEYWORDS

Men of color educators, role models, boys of color, intersectionality, social justice

SEVEN JUSTICE-ORIENTED PRINCIPLES FOR MEN OF COLOR WORKING WITH BOYS OF COLOR

In recent years, there has been an explosion of intervention strategies aimed at increasing the educational achievement of boys of color by providing them with successful role models, mentors, and/or teachers who are also men of color (MOC). These efforts include increasing the number of MOC who are classroom teachers as well as creating mentorship programs in which these men may guide and support boys of color in schools. Former President Obama's My Brother Keeper Initiative (MBK) serves as a nation-wide example of this growing trend.[1] While these efforts are supported by research that documents the positive impacts that MOC educators have on their students (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019), these developments are also supported by unrealistic, and frequently problematic, narratives assigned to the role these men will play in increasing educational achievement (Pabon, 2016). This practice brief aims to shed light on the complicated image of MOC educators, and map out seven justice-oriented principles to help educators navigate discourses of heroism, patriarchy, and deficit that often frame the work MOC do in the classroom.

Popular views of urban education suggest that MOC educators are seen as rare and heroic gems on school campuses. They are hailed as the social studies teacher who makes history fun and relevant for his students, or the basketball coach who teaches life lessons on and off the court. They are positioned as the no-excuses math teacher who can "reach" even the most "troubled" boys; "If anyone can reach him, it's you," so they say. Sometimes they are the after-school youth worker who talks sports, music, and college to students who linger at the end of the day. Boys are imagined to flock to MOC educators for their relatability and authenticity, and administrators love them for their ability to work with wayward boys and turn grades around with their larger-than-life presence on campus. One assumption often undergirding these efforts is that students lack positive representations of manhood at home, and that MOC educators can serve as much-needed role models. This positions educators as corrective representations of proper manhood—becoming big brothers or father-like figures to help guide students away from the shortfalls that they presumably avoided themselves. The figure of the role model positions MOC as living proof of potential, and the epitome of possibility in liberal multicultural visions of schooling—which emphasize the importance of inclusion and diversity within the current system.[2]

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1 MBK was a 2014 White House initiative which sought to create opportunities and improve life outcomes for boys and young men of color. Following its presidential establishment, the program has transitioned into the private sector to become a primary initiative of the Obama Foundation.

2 Liberal multiculturalism describes the ways access and inclusion to liberal protections and state-sponsored systems, such as schools, are extended to minorities to diminish racial inequality. Critics of liberal multiculturalism challenge the notion that justice can be achieved within current liberal structures, which are rooted in racial capitalism (Melamed, 2011). From this perspective, racial justice can only be achieved through systemic change or the abolition of the system itself.

Despite the popularity of the male role model approach, recent research offers compelling critiques of fundamental assumptions undergirding this turn towards MOC educators. One concern is that by touting MOC as the educational saviors of boys of color, we advance an individualistic solution to a structural problem (Dumas, 2016). This places unfair and unrealistic expectations on the superhero-like work expected from these educators (Brockenbrough, 2018; Pabon, 2016) and locates the problem (to be fixed) in individual boys, rather than in the context and structures that marginalize them. Similarly, feminist and intersectional scholars point to the ways the recent turn towards boys of color brings a "patriarchy enhancement" approach to racial equality, while also obscuring the struggles of girls and gender non-binary students (Annamma, 2017; Morris, 2016; Ritchie & Davis, 2017). Kimberlé Crenshaw (2014) refers MBK as an "intersectional failure" in which racial inequality is seen in terms of patriarchal absences—framing communities of color as disenfranchised because of a lack of men socialized to be traditional patriarchs in nuclear families. This pronounced focus on the *masculine* qualities of MOC educators grounds itself in essentialist notions of who counts as an ideal man (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). Dominant notions of "traditional" and "respectable" manhood become the idealized qualities of MOC educators, while queer and trans masculinities are implicitly or explicitly marked as deviant (Woodson & Pabon, 2016). Relatedly, the focus on the masculine performance of MOC educators has led them to be disproportionately positioned as disciplinarians (Brockenbrough, 2015) and enforcers of proper manhood (Martino & Frank, 2006).

As educational leaders and policy makers continue to embrace efforts to increase the number of MOC in education, the rhetoric of *why* and *how* we value these men presents a difficult challenge for educators who navigate these contradictory discourses (Oeur, 2018). This practice brief aims to support MOC educators by mapping out seven justice-oriented principles to consider when working with boys of color. As a Latino man who works in educational research and practice, these principles are a synthesis of critical educational literature, my own research, and my own experiences navigating what it means to be a "good example" to boys and young men of color. These principles take into account race, class, gender, sexuality, and anti-blackness, and are meant to help MOC educators disrupt compromising discourses of role modeling that can co-opt their work as social justice educators. It is my hope that this work serves as a resource for MOC who are committed to intersectional racial justice in schools and beyond.

SEVEN PRINCIPLES

1 *CHALLENGE DEFICIT PERSPECTIVES*

MOC educators are frequently seen as the success stories of a demographic at risk of failure. While stories of beating-the-odds success may be inspiring to some students, they also de-emphasize the structural nature of inequality and instead highlight individual qualities that have seemingly contributed to individual success (e.g., positive attitude, strong character, self-discipline, grit, etc.). These narratives often rely on racial stereotypes and pathologize "bad" members of a group (e.g., "Mr. Singh chose to avoid falling in with the wrong crowd, like others, and instead worked hard and stayed on the right path."). Rejecting the deficit model means challenging the idea that the problem exists within the students themselves and refusing to view students as the ones in need of repair. It also means challenging the notion that role models have something special that students lack. These educators are often positioned as needing to help build positive character in young men, as if it is the individual student, and not societal structures, that contribute to inequality. Instead, MOC educators should be valued for their skills as educators and ability to recognize the wealth of knowledge and capabilities that students bring from their own lives and communities (Gonzalez et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005).

2 *REFUSE THE ROLE OF HERO AND SAVIOR*

MOC educators are often upheld as heroes who have returned to the classroom to save boys similar to themselves. Their biographies are often made into stories of survival and redemption and are neatly packaged and embellished for philanthropists eager to fund their heroism (Baldridge, 2017). However, this framing reinforces the narrative that boys of color are at-risk, broken, and in constant peril, while also positioning individual educators as unrealistic fixes to racial inequality in education. Racial inequality in schools is **rooted in systemic racism.** This includes issues of school funding, the school-to-prison pipeline, policy, curriculum, as well as societal problems such as wealth inequality, mass incarceration, policing, food insecurity, housing segregation, and houselessness. While honoring the impactful role that individuals can play in the lives of young people, MOC educators must refuse to be positioned as heroes and saviors. This unfairly puts the onus of change on individual educators while also obscuring the complexity and deep roots of racial inequality inside and outside of schools.

> "REJECTING THE DEFICIT MODEL MEANS CHALLENGING THE IDEA THAT THE PROBLEM EXISTS WITHIN THE STUDENTS THEMSELVES AND REFUSING TO VIEW STUDENTS AS THE ONES IN NEED OF REPAIR"

3 *DISRUPT THE (HETERO)PATRIARCHAL IMAGINATION OF MALE MENTORSHIP*

Women of color feminists have long pointed to the ways visions of racial empowerment frequently reproduce patriarchal and heterosexual norms (Garcia, 1997; Lorde, 2007; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). Today, feminist and queer scholars have approached the current movement to empower boys and men of color with hesitation and concern (Lindsay, 2018). Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) describes MBK and similar programs as employing a discourse of patriarchy enhancement—extending the notion that racial justice will be achieved by restoring MOC into traditional [heteropatriarchal[3]] roles in the family and community. This framing positions MOC educators as potential models of ideal manhood; someone who will guide their protégés down a similar path. While having a role model is important, educators must actively disrupt, rather than uphold, heteropatriarchal expectations of manhood. This is particularly important for educators who identify as cisgender, heterosexual men, and whose everyday behavior may unconsciously normalize hegemonic ways of being a man (i.e., men must be masculine leaders, protectors, athletic, tough, dominant, straight, and aspire to be fathers and husbands in traditional family arrangements). Instead, educators must be conscious of their gender performance, meaning, how they signal and embody manhood to those around them, and reflect on how their own expression of manhood inevitably influences the ways their students recognize what makes a "successful" man. Intentional efforts must be made to make space for diverse masculinities and queer inclusive practices for all students (McCready, 2010, 2019). This does not mean ignoring the unique experiences that boys face, but rather acknowledging that their experiences are not monolithic. It also requires an awareness that dominant notions of gender and sexuality inform how society defines "good male role models."

> **"WHILE HAVING A ROLE MODEL IS IMPORTANT, EDUCATORS MUST ACTIVELY DISRUPT, RATHER THAN UPHOLD, HETEROPATRIARCHAL EXPECTATIONS OF MANHOOD"**

3 Heteropatriarchy describes the way patriarchy intersects with heterosexism. It is a social system in which cisgender, heterosexual men hold primary power and predominate roles in political, social, and family life. Culturally, heteropatriarchy normalizes specific gender relations and social arrangements. For example, value is ascribed to hetero-monogamous marriage and nuclear familial arrangements, while non-heteronormative and queer lives are thought to be unnatural, undesirable, or unsuccessful. The ability to embody and naturalize heteropatriarchal norms is often implicitly or explicitly expected from MOC educators. For example, qualities like being a "loving husband and father" are seen as professionally important and frequently added to professional biographies.

4 DECONSTRUCT (NOT RECONSTRUCT) MANHOOD

MOC educators are often touted as models of a reformed or non-toxic masculinity (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012). However, educators must disrupt the belief that they are guides towards building a better manhood and instead deprioritize the importance of manhood itself. For example, statements like *real men don't hit women* or *real men are able to show emotion* make the error of prioritizing the construction of new and corrected boundaries of manhood as the goal of the statement. This comes at the detriment of the important issues: the public health crisis of intimate partner violence and the importance of learning emotional intelligence. MOC educators must de-emphasize the focus on their ability to be models of a reformed manhood and instead prioritize teaching against ideologies that shape gender inequality and oppression (i.e. patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia). While still addressing the unique (and diverse) experiences of boys of color, educators and programs must avoid creating new boundaries of what defines a proper man. This inevitability leads to essentialist and exclusionary gender practices. Currently, many school-based programs for boys of color invest in the importance of manhood. I urge educators to approach investments in manhood with caution. Although proclamations of progressive gender politics have become the norm in men-centered programs, research shows that patriarchal narratives of men's empowerment often continue to guide program missions. Furthermore, some all-men spaces continue to be spaces in which issues of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia remain commonplace and unaddressed (Fergus et al., 2014; Lindsay, 2018; Oeur, 2018, Singh, 2020).

5 CRITICALLY ANALYZE HOW CULTURAL RELEVANCY IS VALUED

For decades, the term culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has been used to describe the ways justice-oriented educators make teaching relevant and responsive to the social realities, cultural practices, and languages of their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, in recent years, critical race educators have criticized the ways CRP has become a catch-all phrase for anything remotely relatable to students, arguing that CRP is frequently robbed of its political and emancipatory foundations (Paris & Alim, 2017). For example, in schools, MOC educators are often valued for their ability to culturally relate with boys of color. Unfortunately, cultural relevancy can be easily co-opted in ways that uphold liberal multiculturalism and the current status quo. MOC educators report that they are often thrust into the role of disciplinarian at their school because colleagues perceive them to be best suited to talk to (and punish) boys of color (Brockenbrough, 2015). Being the friendly enforcers of school discipline, or the relatable and charismatic teacher who upholds problematic curriculum and policy should not be the goal of inclusive education. Instead, MOC educators must conscientiously strive to push beyond superficial expressions of cultural relevancy and instead employ a pedagogy that is decidedly critical, emancipatory, and humanizing.

6 CHALLENGE ANTI-BLACK FRAMINGS OF MULTICULTURALISM

Anti-blackness is interwoven into the fabric of how urban schooling is imagined and materially structured in the United States (Grant, 2020). While emergent ideologies of multiculturalism have begun to celebrate racial diversity in schools, blackness continues to exist in tension with liberal expressions of multiculturalism, which have little interest in radically affirming Black life and freedom (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Shange, 2019). Instead, blackness is often framed as antagonistic to multicultural opportunity—positing Black people as making poor individual choices, lacking determination and hard work, and unwilling to assimilate in an increasingly "fair" and "inclusive" society. In the national educational discourse, Black boys in particular are imagined to represent a persistent problem (Noguera, 2009). Because MOC educators are

often framed as models of respectability, they must take great care to disrupt, and not uphold, anti-blackness in schools. For non-Black MOC educators in particular, there must be an awareness of the ways the imagined figure of the positive male role model can often be articulated in relation to blackness (Singh, 2021). This juxtaposition contrasts “respectable” MOC educators with anti-Black images of a problematic and deviant manhood, which is often articulated through anti-Black language (e.g., thugs, delinquents, gangsters, urban juveniles, ghetto, etc.). It is crucial for non-Black MOC to reject a model minority-like positionality and disrupt the dichotomy of good male role models and bad boys. This also means refusing to pathologize, and instead honor markers of blackness in our cultures, communities, ourselves, and our students. This includes refusing anti-Black dress codes, disciplinary policies, respectability politics, grading practices, and also being responsive to the larger societal context of anti-Black racism. It also means actively becoming authentic allies, co-conspirators, and helping make space for Black joy, life, and freedom.

7 *TEACH AND DREAM TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE*

Much of the discourse on MOC educators is that they serve as role models to help boys succeed within the current system. They are framed as proof that resilience and hard work can bring about success. While the previous points outline the ways educators can deconstruct and refuse the compromising discourses that frame their roles in schools, it is also important that MOC become agents of transformational justice. Presently, we are in an era in which almost everything in education is now labeled as *social justice.* Tuck and Yang (2018) bring a “warm ambivalence” (p.3) to the term and remind us that clarity and commitment in how we define justice-projects are important. Beyond reformist iterations of social justice, abolitionist and decolonial movements in education offer compelling visions of how to imagine education beyond its current form (Grant et al., 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2018). As more MOC educators are recruited into the field of education, it is imperative that the goal is not simply to help students survive, but instead to radically reimagine schooling beyond survival and towards freedom (Love, 2019). MOC educators must be allies and co-conspirators in these movements as they play a part in working towards intersectional racial justice in schools and beyond.

“MOC EDUCATORS MUST BE ALLIES AND CO-CONSPIRATORS IN THESE MOVEMENTS AS THEY PLAY A PART IN WORKING TOWARDS INTERSECTIONAL RACIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS AND BEYOND”

CONCLUSION

Students excel when they have educators that look like them. Research shows that MOC build caring relationships with boys of color (Brown, 2009; Fergus et al., 2014), are excellent educators (Lynn, 2006), and have positive impacts on academic achievement (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). This is important, and efforts to recruit and retain more MOC educators should be supported (Woodson & Bristol, 2020). However, the logics informing *how* and *why* MOC educators are valued in schools can often be contradictory to larger visions of social justice. This can make popular efforts to support boys of color with MOC educators easily co-optable, ineffective, and fall short of meaningful change.

The seven principles I have outlined are points that I continue to reflect on in my own work with young people. As educators, we teach in institutions never meant for our communities to succeed. We navigate contradictions and are forced to make compromises. For those of us who are MOC, the liberal multicultural moment often assigns value to our work in ways that we may find problematic, and even racist. These seven points are meant to help educators recognize and disrupt the ways problematic discourses can frame our work with students. This list was generated from my experiences as a researcher and educator, and I encourage educators to add to it or reevaluate some of these points. It is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, it aims to contribute to a larger conversation surrounding how MOC may navigate the contradictory politics that praise us as successful role models working in a system not meant for our success. As more MOC continue to enter to field of education, let us not be superheroes, patriarchs, or disciplinarians in the classroom, but instead agents and allies of transformation. It is my hope that these seven principles help support MOC educators as they deconstruct problematic discourses surrounding their presence in schools and continue to work towards more radical and emancipatory visions of justice in education.

1. **CHALLENGE DEFICIT PERSPECTIVES**
2. **REFUSE THE ROLE OF HERO AND SAVIOR**
3. **DISRUPT THE (HETERO)PATRIARCHAL IMAGINATION OF MALE MENTORSHIP**
4. **DECONSTRUCT (NOT RECONSTRUCT) MANHOOD**
5. **CRITICALLY ANALYZE HOW CULTURAL RELEVANCY IS VALUED**
6. **CHALLENGE ANTI-BLACK FRAMINGS OF MULTICULTURALISM**
7. **TEACH AND DREAM TOWADS EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE**

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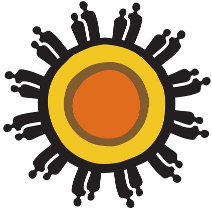

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