

# Meeting the Learning Needs of African American Youth in the Library

Article

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If all children can learn, then why aren't all children learning? According to *Understanding Black Male Learning Styles* by Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu, only twelve percent of African American males are proficient in reading (2010). Eighty percent of African American students in special education are male and fifty-three percent of all African American males drop out of school. In a country overwhelmed with material wealth, loads of technology, many degreed professionals, and a host of support systems, we are still failing our African American male students.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A summit on closing the literacy achievement gap for young black males was hosted in June of 2012 by the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the School of Library and Information at North Carolina Central University. The goal of the summit was to explore why black males are underachieving and to discuss what public and school libraries can do to support both academic achievement and lifelong success. A keynote address by Dr. Alfred Tatum, author of the NCTE James N. Britton award-winning *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males*, provided much for all of us to consider.

First, we can't fix a problem unless we understand the problem. According to Tatum, who is not only an author, but also an associate professor in the Literacy, Language, and Culture Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago and former middle school teacher, African American males aren't engaged in a conspiracy to fail themselves. African American adolescent males are unique and face their own challenges. It's not just about their literacy, it is about their lives (Tatum 2012). So, the African American male psyche is a complicated multi-layered mixture of outside media influences, stereotypes, peer pressure, how they see themselves, and how they think others see them.

How, then, can we respond and become a part of the solution? We've admitted that we have it wrong. We are, however, embracing an attitude to get it right and willing to take small steps before bigger ones. Both school and public librarians want to help, and they can play a significant role in raising the literacy efforts of young African American males. How can we, as school librarians, in particular, help tackle this problem?

## SOLUTIONS FROM SCHOOL LIBRARIES

Libraries need to make better connections. Tatum states, "It is not about reading scores, it's about scoring with reading" (Tatum 2012). Tatum goes on to say that we need to create opportunities for African American males to identify texts that mark their times and their lives. Their opinion counts. We need to involve them in the selection of books through surveys, suggestion boxes, and simply by asking. We can engage their interests by asking about their hobbies, future goals, and even pop culture. We can choose titles that embrace literacy as a way out of violence and poverty as well as positive books about surviving, alternatives, and overcoming odds. Biographies and books that build textual lineages by putting meaningful texts at the core of a challenging curriculum can also be purchased. Alfred Tatum's textual lineage includes such works as *Black Boy*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Additional titles could include *Hope in the Unseen* by Ron Suskin and *Rite of Passage* by Richard Wright (Tatum 2009).

Readers can engage with the curriculum through essential questions, writing, and self-assessment. Personal writing can be included in the curriculum at every opportunity. Debate can be encouraged not only through an open honest forum but also by creating a debate team. Students can choose topics, talk about barriers, and figure out solutions.

School librarians in Durham, North Carolina, created some excellent opportunities to put enabling texts in the hands of African American males. A recently published article in the *Phi Delta Kappan* highlights the enormous collective effort that was taken to close the literacy gap in the district's fifty-five schools (Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012). The school librarians from this school district took on a multi-pronged approach that included analyzing enabling texts in their collections, getting the texts into the hands of students via book mobiles, and "read-in" events. They let their young African American male students become active material "selectors" for their libraries. Once the titles were selected and ordered, they were checked out to their selectors as they were received at libraries. The article carefully notes that not all of the titles selected were considered to be enabling (Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012). But giving the young men the opportunity to select titles ensured that there would be books of interest to these young readers. Can high school and public libraries offer exposure to enabling texts in a manner that encourage young African American men to read? The evidence suggests that they can via partnerships and other opportunities.

## SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARY PARTNERSHIPS

School and public libraries can partner to put enabling texts in the hands of young African American male students. Public librarians at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library worked with various Charlotte Mecklenburg schools to support Guys Read book clubs. The book clubs were conducted at various middle schools around Mecklenburg County. Male library staff members partnered with male volunteers from across the community to visit some pre-selected schools once a month, where they would read and discuss a range of teen-themed titles. The book clubs often served as platforms for a wider discussion of what was going in the lives of these young men. Relationships between the students and the adult males began to form as they participated in these clubs. Book clubs similar to these could be formed using enabling texts as the basis and could provide rewarding experiences for all involved.

Many enabling texts can be found on both school and public library shelves. These enabling texts, as defined by Dr. Tatum, are texts that move beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include an academic, cultural, emotional, and social focus that move students closer to examining issues they find relevant to their lives (2012).

Just as there are enabling texts, there are also disabling texts. These texts ignore local contexts and the desire adolescents have for self-definition. They can also reinforce perceptions of being a struggling reader while simultaneously disengaging from the text. Librarians should seek ways to get enabling texts into the hands of these young readers. These young people need to find voices that speak to them and see the dizzying array of literary choices that are available.

Bibliographies that list many suggestions of enabling texts are accessible on the *Building a Bridge to Literacy for African American Males* website ([http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/?page\\_id=399](http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/?page_id=399)). Some of these suggestions include Kekla Magoon's *The Rock and the River*, a fascinating story set in Chicago during the late 1960s. In this book, a boy struggles with two different approaches to effecting change in the Civil Rights Era. Another selection is the poetic musings of Tupac Shakur in *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*. Many public libraries already have areas of their building that are specifically dedicated to teen customers. Enabling texts can be displayed in these areas where teens are likely to hang out.

Displays alone, however, may not be enough to facilitate interest. Book reviews or writing contests, based on the enabling texts, could be another way to encourage the reading of these texts. Book clubs that actively promote enabling texts could also help. These are just a few of the ways we can incorporate these texts into our library collection. The bottom line is that the payoff can be huge if we can get these texts into the hands of these young African American men.

## REDEFINING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE

Do best practices for libraries overlook African American males? Tatum warns that if literacy is about their lives, no reading strategy, no literacy program, no remediation will close the achievement gap for adolescent African American males. Therefore, adolescent African American males should be encouraged to connect with reading. This could change the trajectory of their lives by defining who they are through textual lineages texts with significance, carefully chosen because they are useful to young black males, and because they matter.

Staff development and professional libraries should include the latest in research. Book studies with titles such as *Reading for Their Life* by Alfred Tatum, *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap* by Alfred Tatum, *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life* by Baruti K. Kafele, *Understanding Poverty and A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruth K. Payne should be available. Workshops should be based on this research. Information from the summit research, *Building a Bridge to Literacy for Adolescent African American Males*, should also be highlighted (<http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/files/2012/09/Building-A-Bridge-to-Literacy-for-African-American-Males.pdf>).

We librarians can share what we learn with others and reach out to the extended communities to teach and collaborate. School libraries and public libraries are important. Tatum's voice resonates when he says that African American males will continue to underperform in school as they wait for educators to get it right. As librarians, we know that every non-reading child simply has not met the right book!

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Building a Bridge to Literacy*. <http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/>; Hughes-Hassell, Sandra, Casey H. Rawson, Lisa Leonard McCracken, Mary Gray Cunningham, Heather Vance, Katy J. Boone, Jennifer Boone. "Librarians Form a Bridge of Books to Advance Literacy." *Phi Delta Kappan* 93, no.5 (2012): 17. MasterFILE Complete. Web. (accessed December 12, 2012); Hughes-Hassell, Sandra, Kafi Kumasi, Casey H. Rawson, and Amanda Hitson. *Building a Bridge to Literacy for African American*

*Male Youth: A Call to Action for the Library Community*. The School of Information & Library Science, 2012. <http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/files/2012/09/Building-A-Bridge-to-Literacy-for-African-American-Males.pdf>; Kungful, Jawanza. *Understanding Black Male Learning Styles*. African American Images, 2010.; Tatum, Alfred W. "Bridge to Literacy." Keynote presentation, Building a Bridge to Literacy for African American Males Summit, Chapel Hill, NC, June 3-5, 2012.; Tatum, Alfred W. "Enabling Texts: Texts that Matter." Hampton-Brown Edge. [http://www.hbedge.net/profdev/guides/Edge\\_TE\\_AM2a\\_fwo.pdf](http://www.hbedge.net/profdev/guides/Edge_TE_AM2a_fwo.pdf) (accessed December 11, 2012.); Tatum, Alfred W. *Reading for Their Life: (Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males*. Heinemann, 2009.

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