

How Adolescent Black Boys Perceive their Mattering: Initial Findings from The Black Boy Mattering Project

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Abstract

Our qualitative, school-based project, *The Black Boy Mattering Project*, aims to understand how the interpersonal experiences of Black boys and young men have fostered their feelings of mattering. Specifically, we expand on the socio-psychological concept of *mattering* (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981; Carey 2019; 2020) to investigate how cultural contexts, families, peers, educators, and other stakeholders signify to Black boys and young men that they matter. *Mattering* refers to an individual's perception of their importance, reliance, and awareness to others (Elliot, Kao, & Grant, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In our project, we augment the construct of *mattering* pertinent to the racialized experiences of Black boys and young men by drawing on *mattering* sub-concepts manifested through a race analysis, and the Black Lives Matter movement, such as *marginal* (feelings of insignificance or not mattering), *partial* (mattering solely because of one's contributions, successes, or talents), and *comprehensive* mattering (fully mattering as existing beings) (Carey 2019; 2020).

Research Questions

- How do Black boys and young men in high school demonstrate feelings of mattering in relationship to individuals across various domains?
- How do the study findings inform the ways educational stakeholders create school policies and practices that compel Black boys and young men to comprehensively matter to themselves, their communities, and various school actors?

Method

The four researchers for this project partnered with a Title I racially and ethnically diverse (38% African-American; 32% White; 21% Hispanic or Latino; 4% Asian-American; 5% Other) high school that is comprised of 1,059 students (51% male). Criteria for participating in the project included students who self-identified as either a boy or young man, and Black or African-American. Project activities consisted of 32 semi-structured interviews, two focus group interviews, and experiences like a field trip a local art museum, where the boys could reimagine and define the ways that they matter. Seventeen boys participated in 45-minute semi-structured interviews with individual researchers, and five of those boys participated in focus group interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and coded by the researchers via Dedoose software.

Results

As the project is ongoing, preliminary findings revealed how the boys defined their perceived mattering, and what they attributed to their mattering:

- At school, teachers who held the boys to high expectations, and noticed and intervened when they needed help positively influenced the boys' perceptions of their mattering at school.
- However, some boys who were athletes attributed their mattering to teachers due to their role in sports: they felt that they *partially mattered* because teachers paid attention to them and provided supports solely because they were athletes, and they often appeared distant and less supportive outside of sport seasons.
- Moreover, negative interactions with teachers and peers that elicited discriminatory messaging affected how the boys perceived that they *marginally mattered*.
- Further, the boys' reflections of their school's lack of response to the "dual pandemics" (i.e., the adversities and inequities that were illuminated during the COVID-19 pandemic and extrajudicial anti-Black violence) often signified to them that they *marginally mattered*.

The Black Boy Mattering Project



Conclusions

The Black Boy Mattering Project is an effort to engage with Black high school boys to amplify their voices on how their experiences across contexts, such as school, sports, family, and so forth, formulate the ways that they matter to themselves, their peers, their school and their communities. Our findings have illuminated a need for educators to continue forming positive, trusting relationships with Black youth, and challenge cultural messaging and structures that indicate that Black lives do not matter (i.e., *marginal mattering*). Presently, we will continue to explore how the boys' perceived mattering has altered, especially given the second wave of the Black Lives Matter movement and the schooling adjustments made during the COVID-19 pandemic.