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Introduction to Special Issue: From #BlackLivesMatter to #BlackMindsMatter

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Since 2012, the ubiquitous slogan and hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has been used as a rallying cry, a protest chant and a reaction to state-sponsored violence that targets Black Americans. It embodies a call to action, bringing awareness to the plight of Black American lives and livelihood, yet effectively polarizing contemporary, mainstream American culture. It is the mantra of a movement—a movement cultivated to provide a voice to the voiceless, visibility to the violated and power to the vulnerable in American society. To Black Americans, *Black Lives Matter* is an affirmation of inequality and injustice, which seeks to unsettle the status quo social order in a society that appears to mostly benefit the privileged or those in power. It resonates concern regarding matters related to local and national policy, instances of police brutality and mass incarceration within the U.S. criminal justice system. To White Americans, *Black Lives Matter* symbolizes separatism, anti-police and constitutes a disruption of America’s class structure. This special issue of the *Journal of African American Males in Education (JAAME)* “#BlackMindsMatter” aims to shed light on the importance of educational experiences and outcomes for Black boys, and all Black children, beginning with the preschool years. According to the First 5 California program, “Research shows that kids who attend quality preschool have higher math and reading skills, are better prepared for kindergarten, behave better in class, and are more likely to graduate from high school and go to college” (First 5 CA, p. 1).

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In the first article, Essien concentrates on early childhood education, looking to identify promising teaching and learning practices employed by educators with a proven record of success in serving Black boys. “Students in urban school districts, regardless of their race or ethnicity, prefer teachers of color...overall findings suggest that minority teachers can translate their experiences and identities to form rapport with students of different backgrounds” (Will, 2016, p.1). In her article, “Teaching Black Boys in Early Childhood Education: Promising Practices from Exemplar Teachers,” Essien examined the narratives of 48 teachers in California who documented effective strategies for advancing the success of Black boys in early childhood education.

In the second article, “Exclusionary Discipline in Preschool: Young Black Boys Lives Matter,” Wesley and Ellis write about the preschool to prison pipeline that has received increasing exposure over recent years. The ACLU defines the preschool-to-prison pipeline as a system of “...policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (Jones, 2016, p.1). This opinion paper utilizes the recent research from the Yale Child Study Center to suggest the need for preschool educators to review current disciplinary practices. The researchers frame the discussion from the perspective of implicit bias having long-term impact on the lives of preschool-age Black males.

The third article by Wood, Essien and Blevins, “Black Males in Kindergarten: The Effect of Social Skills on Close and Conflictual Relationships with Teachers,” is based on a study set out to test the D-Three Effect on Black male students in Kindergarten. This effect assumes that teachers inherently view Black boys and men through the lens of distrust, disdain, and disregard. Using data derived from 8,790 boys from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten class (ECLS-K, 2011), they found that Black boys in kindergarten are perceived as having greater challenges with externalized problem behavior, attentional focus, and inhibitory control than their male peers.

In the fourth article, “Improving the Vocabulary of At-risk Early Childhood African American Boys: A Meta-Analytic Review,” Roberts discusses how intervening early could be the key to improving academic outcomes for African American males. This meta-analysis summarized the effects of experimental and quasi-experimental design language interventions on the vocabulary acquisition of early childhood African American children from low-income families. Findings suggest a need to invest in research targeting language and vocabulary interventions that best support the needs of African American males in the early childhood years.

The fifth article, “Transformative Leadership: A Multicultural Platform for Advancing African American Male Student Success,” Graham and Nevarez examine utilizing a transformative leadership lens, illustrating the benefits of constructing a multicultural school culture that supports the advancement of African American male students. Specifically, the authors address how the values of social justice, critically relevant pedagogy and empowerment serve as a focal point to challenge inequitable practices, while providing models for equitable change.

In the final article, “Malleability of Classroom Misbehavior among Black Boys,” Neal examines sociocultural factors that shape how students’ and teachers’ conceptualization of classroom misbehavior mediates school discipline inequities. “Records of school discipline referrals indicate that Black students are the most likely to be suspended, expelled, or removed from the classroom setting” (Gregory & Roberts, 2017, p.2). Neal provides a model for practitioners to aid in understanding classroom behavioral sense-making and considers an

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accounting of the progression of classroom disciplinary moments and suggestions for future research.

We, as co-editors, are proud to offer this compilation of research and data (including practical steps) to this *JAAME* “#BlackMindsMatter” special issue with the objective to change a national, public-school culture that has a long-standing reputation for underpreparing and damaging Black children. Specifically, this issue addresses how values of social justice, critically relevant pedagogy and empowerment serve as focal points to challenge unequitable practices, while providing models for equitable change. With respect to early childhood education, this issue places emphasis on the educational practices that directly impact the educational outcomes for future generations of Black male students.

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