BUILDING A BRIDGE TO LITERACY
FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE YOUTH

A CALL TO ACTION FOR THE LIBRARY COMMUNITY

June 3-5, 2012

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
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A report written and edited by

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This report can be downloaded without charge at: Building a Bridge to Literacy, http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/

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Why a Summit on Libraries and African American Male Youth Literacy?

“It’s only when our feelings rise to a sense of indignation and outrage, that we can muster up the kind of collective will that it is going to take to make what’s wrong, right.”

Dr. Ernest Morrell
Teachers’ College
Columbia University

The need for quality literacy education is strong, particularly for certain underserved populations. One group in critical need of improved literacy instruction is African American males. According to recent (2009) NAEP data, only 33% of United States 4th graders and 32% of U.S. 8th graders performed at or above proficiency in reading on national tests. The fact that only one-third of these students are reading at a proficient level may be enough to give anyone pause, but for African American students the situation is even more desperate: only 16% of African American 4th graders and 14% of African American 8th graders performed at or above the proficient level in 2009. African American males performed, on average, six percentage points lower than females on these tests in 4th grade and nine points lower in 8th grade.

Poor test scores are not the worst consequence of illiteracy for these young men. Recent research shows that lack of adequate reading and writing skills can set the stage for a continuance of intergenerational poverty, crime, and substance abuse. National statistics support these claims:

- Fewer than half of African American males receive their high school diplomas;
- African American men make up only 5% of the United States college population;
- While comprising only 14% of the national population, African American men make up over 40% of the prison population;
- The unemployment rate for African American males is nearly twice that of white males; and
- African American adolescents and young adults are roughly eight times more likely to be the victim of homicide than whites in the same age group.

Dr. Alfred Tatum, whose research focuses on best practices for literacy instruction with African American males, summarizes the situation when he states, “though unaware of these statistics, [African American males] are living them.”

In a recent report entitled A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools, the Council of the Great City Schools calls the achievement gap for African American males a “national catastrophe” and notes that “there is no concerted national effort to improve the education, social and employment outcomes of African American males.”

Historically, libraries and librarians have actively embraced a role in promoting literacy. Although libraries in the 21st century have become increasingly associated with technology and non-print resources, their role in literacy development is no less important. Traditional literacy skills and abilities (reading and writing) remain essential components of a 21st century education. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills states that “every 21st century skills implementation requires the development of core academic subject knowledge,” especially reading.

Recognizing this, many Library and Information Science (LIS) professional associations have assumed an active role in promoting and teaching literacy skills to today’s children and teens. Empowering Learners, the American Association of School Librarians’ (AASL) most recent guidelines for school library programs includes “promoting reading as a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment” as one of the teaching for learning guidelines.
The public library association (PLA) and the association for library service to children (ALSC) have partnered to create the Every Child Ready to Read initiative, which aims to prepare parents to implement reading instruction techniques with their young children. ALSC has completely redesigned their Born to Read Program to help expectant and new parents become aware that reading to a baby from birth is critical to the baby’s growth and well-being.

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) sponsors Teen Read Week, an annual literacy initiative celebrated in libraries and bookstores that provides parents, caregivers, and teens with resources to encourage recreational reading habits.

Supporting lifelong learning is a key component of the mission of public and school libraries. We believe taking action on the national crisis surrounding the literacy achievement of African American males is an extension of this mission, and one the library community must embrace.

There are over 120,000 libraries in the United States, 89% of which are either school or public libraries. By marshaling the energies of the thousands of librarians in communities across the US, we believe the library community will improve the quality of literacy and life for African American males.

In the final chapter of their book, Change is Gonna Come: Transforming Literacy Education for African American Students, Patricia Edwards, Gwendolyn McMillon, and Jennifer Turner repeat this refrain:

“No more excuses, and no more delays. Come on people!”

They challenge us to move from talk to action—to make literacy education a priority to improve the quality of life for African American youth.

We accept their challenge.

With funding from a 2011 grant awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), The School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the School of Library and Information Science at North Carolina Central University hosted the summit “Building a Bridge to Literacy for African American Male Youth: A Call to Action for the Library Community” in June, 2012.

The summit provided an opportunity for the library community to join stakeholders from other like-minded organizations to consider the role libraries can play in: 1) closing the literacy achievement gap, 2) nurturing the resolve of African American male youth, helping them reconcile their multiple identities, and reimage their place in the world, 3) enabling African American male youth to take action in their own lives and in their communities, and 4) transforming LIS education and research to bring about change in library resources, services, and programs for Black male youth.

The outcome of the summit is a call to action for the library community. We agree with Dr. Ernest Morrell who stated in his keynote address, “summits are important, but it is going to take all of us dedicating our lives to end this achievement gap.” It is no longer sufficient simply to discuss what libraries “could” do or what libraries “should” do. It is time for the library community to act.

By taking action, libraries will be supporting young Black males like this student from North Carolina Central University who told summit participants, “When I was growing up I was told everything from, ‘You’ll never make it to your eighteenth birthday’ to ‘By the time you’re 18 you’ll be shot or dead or in jail.’ Being in college, getting ready to start applying to law school… the people back home would have never thought this possible but I’ve always been one to take every negative thing that was said about me and turn it into a positive. I like proving people wrong.”
The Summit

“People ought to leave with a lesson that they can take to inform the world that they’re engaged and committed to being an agent of change.”

Chancellor Charlie Nelms  
North Carolina Central University

Just as there is no single cause or origin for the current crisis in literacy education for African American males, no one group of professionals or agencies will be able to close the achievement gap on their own. Establishing lines of communication among the library community, educators, researchers, educational policy-makers, community organizations, publishers, and African American male youth is a critical step toward enabling these groups to better coordinate their efforts to improve the quality of life for young Black males. Summit planners cast a wide net for participants, keynote speakers and panelists. Summit attendees included representatives from 14 states and various stakeholder groups including public and school libraries, institutions of higher education, national organizations such as the Council of the Great City Schools, the American Library Association, Teaching Tolerance, and the publishing industry, to name just a few. (See Appendix A on page 28 for a list of the participants.)

The summit agenda, ambitious for two and a half days, provided the necessary groundwork for exploring the substantive issues related to the library community and African American male youth.

The Summit focused on three essential questions:

1. Why should libraries focus on the literacy needs of African American male youth?

2. What do we know about, research, programs and resources?

3. What actions must the library community take?

Participants were asked to think deeply, challenge ideas, brainstorm, question and plan. Most importantly, they were given permission to be passionate. As Ernest Morrell reminded summit participants, we must “stop talking about this as a scientific inquiry and begin to talk about it as a national tragedy, a tragedy of lost potential, lost human capital. Or as the students say, lost dreams because every student represents dreams.”

Summit Keynote Speakers

Dr. Ernest Morrell — Dr. Morrell is a Professor of English Education and Director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Morrell's research draws upon youth's interest in popular culture and participatory media technologies to increase motivation and to promote academic literacy development, civic engagement and college access. He is Vice President of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

Dr. Alfred Tatum — Dr. Tatum is an Associate Professor in the Literacy, Language, and Culture Program at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is the current Director of the University of Illinois Chicago Reading Clinic. Dr. Tatum's research and national advocacy focus on the literacy needs of African American males, particularly those in urban communities.

Day 1

Participants were welcomed to the summit by the summit organizers and by North Carolina Central University’s Chancellor Charlie Nelms. Dr. Ernest Morrell of Teachers’ College, Columbia University presented “Cultivating Youth Voices: Literacy and Agency for African American Males.” The presentation focused on the use of popular culture and participatory media technologies to increase motivation and to promote academic literacy development and civic engagement. Following Dr. Morrell’s presentation, attendees participated in a World Café activity in which they discussed the characteristics of effective school and public library programs for Black male youth. Each group recorded their discussion on large sheets of paper and then created symbols that reflected the essence of their conversations.
Day 2

Dr. Alfred Tatum of the University of Illinois-Chicago kicked off day two with a keynote address entitled “Bridge to Literacy” in which he discussed his research and his experiences teaching reading and writing to young Black males using enabling texts. Participants then heard from a panel of academics in the areas of library science and education (Dr. Jane Gangi of Mount Saint Mary College, Dr. Kafi Kumasi of Wayne State University, and Dr. Ernest Johnson of the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching) and a panel of practitioners including a public librarian (Stephanie Wilkes of Ouachita Parish Public Library, LA), a school librarian (Karen Lemmons of Howe Elementary School, Detroit, MI), and a high school principal (Dr. Melissa Jenkins of High Horizons Magnet School, Bridgeport, CT).

Following each presentation, the participants met in working groups to respond to the speakers’ ideas and to discuss issues related to libraries and African American male youth literacy.

Day 3

Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management Kevin Rome of North Carolina Central University (NCCU) provided information about the Centennial Scholars Program, a program designed to promote academic achievement for African American male students at NCCU. Following his presentation, four student members of the NCCU Centennial Scholars Program, one student from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and one high school student participated in a panel in which they were asked to share their views on reading, writing, and libraries. After the panel, summit participants came together in groups to outline key themes and to develop action steps for various stakeholder groups. The events of the summit were summarized in a Wordle and a video.

Summit Advisory Board

Dr. Pauletta Brown Bracy: Professor, School of Library and Information Science, North Carolina Central University

George Coe: President, Baker & Taylor’s Library and Education Division

Nancy Gaj: President and founder, Motherread, Inc.

Dr. Jane Gangi: Associate Professor of Literacy and YA Literature, Mount Saint Mary College

Dr. Kafi D. Kumasi: Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science, Wayne State University

Karen Lemmons: School Librarian, Howe Elementary, Detroit, Michigan

Dr. Deborah Levitov: Managing Editor, School Library Monthly

Dr. Jonathan Livingston: Assistant Professor and Co-Director of the Institute for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families, North Carolina Central University

Dr. Jonda McNair: Associate Professor of Reading Education, Clemson University

Dr. Irene Owens: Dean of North Carolina Central University’s School of Library and Information Science

Brian Pinkney: Award-winning children’s picture book illustrator and author

Dr. Kevin D. Rome: Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, North Carolina Central University

Dr. Barbara K. Stripling: Assistant Professor of Practice, The iSchool, Syracuse University

Dr. Ann C. Weeks: Professor of Practice, College of Information Studies, The University of Maryland
Summit Outcomes—Key Themes

Many hours of video, several hundred pages of notes, and a variety of other documents were generated at the summit. These were analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis and resulted in the key themes discussed below.

The Role of Literacy in the Lives of African American Male Youth

“When intellectual development is stifled, it creates an unwelcoming silence intellectually [and] some of our instructional practices keep many of these young males muffled.”

Dr. Alfred W. Tatum
University of Illinois-Chicago

Much of the discourse about literacy and African American male youth focuses on raising test scores and closing the achievement gap; however, literacy plays a much larger role in the lives of African American male youth. It is connected to intellectual growth, agency, voice, identity, resiliency, resolve and a positive life trajectory. Dr. Tatum argued, “by focusing primarily on the achievement gap we are neglecting the life outcome gap, which is the real gap.”

In his book Reading for Their Life, Dr. Tatum provides an historical perspective on the role of literacy in the lives of African American men in the United States, noting that as early as 1800 Negro literacy societies formed as a place for Black men to read and write “texts that held social, economic, personal, political, and spiritual significance.” Thus, literacy has been, and continues to be, “a collaborative part of African American males’ meaningful and purposeful activism.”

Cultivating reading and writing as “tools or pathways for human development” must be the focus of the library community. Libraries must focus on teaching Black male youth the importance of reading and writing out of school and must provide them with opportunities to not only read and write for enjoyment, but also to improve their life outcomes. Dr. Morrell explains, “Literacy is not just about decoding text. It’s about becoming a superior human being that can act powerfully upon the world.”

The Power of Text

“What I have found is neither effective reading strategies nor literacy reform efforts will close the life outcome gap unless meaningful texts are at the core of the curriculum and educators know how to mediate such texts, giving attention to reading and writing.”

Dr. Alfred W. Tatum
University of Illinois-Chicago

Much has been written about how to improve literacy rates among African American male youth, and a good deal of this research focuses on the choice of texts. Research stresses the importance of providing readers with texts that reflect their personal experiences and texts which accurately portray characters like themselves and their families, friends, and peers. The availability of such culturally relevant texts affects both reading achievement and reading motivation in students. Research shows that “when readers interact with literature that relates to their culture-specific experiences, their reading comprehension performance will improve.”

Research also suggests that youth who typically display antipathy towards reading may react differently when provided with culturally relevant books.

Dr. Tatum takes the idea of culturally relevant texts a step farther arguing that African American males need exposure to texts which not only contain characters who look, act, and think as they do, but texts which encourage and empower these young men to take action in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. Dr. Tatum maintains that one reason African American males suffer academically, emotionally, and culturally is a lack of exposure to “texts that they find meaningful and that will help them critique, understand, and move beyond some of the turmoil-related experiences they encounter outside school.” Tatum calls such texts enabling. Enabling texts:

- promote a healthy psyche,
- reflect an awareness of the real world,
- focus on the collective struggle of African Americans,
- serve as a road map for being, doing, thinking, and acting.
Enabling texts include literary texts and informational texts, and may or may not feature African American characters. Dr. Tatum reminded summit participants, “there is a notion that if we just give Black boys texts with Black characters and authors, then they will get excited…. That is an oversimplification…It’s not just about how [the texts] resonate, it’s about what makes them developmentally appropriate and powerful.” The student panels agreed pointing out that, “Sometimes, we will be able to see ourselves in books in ways we didn’t normally think we would, and it doesn’t have to be an African American character…for me to be able to see myself. It could just be an open-minded character or a smart character or funny character, and from that, I can just think to myself, you know, this author wasn’t writing for [me] but [I] was able to learn something about myself.”

Counterstories are a specific type of enabling text that respects the experiential knowledge of the Black community.

Counterstories include personal narratives and counteract the dominant discourse that presents Black male youth as at risk, without hope, or “out of control and dangerous.” Examples include We Beat the Street: How a Friendship Pact Led to Success by Drs. Sampson Davis, Gregory Jenkins, and Rameck Hunt and The First Part Last by Angela Johnson.

“Enabling texts include classics such as Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass by Frederick Douglass as well as contemporary texts such as the picture book Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down by Andrea Davis Pinkney and the young adult novel We Could Be Brothers by Derrick Barnes.”

The arguments for incorporating popular culture (music, film, television, and other mass media artifacts) into literacy instruction for Black male youth are compelling. Research has shown that the critical teaching of popular culture can produce powerful academic and social results for Black male youth. Popular culture is relevant to their lives, connects their literacies with the dominant literacies promoted in schools, and provides a forum for the critical examination of social and political issues. It can also motivate Black male youth to become creators of content and to engage in social action.

In his presentation, Dr. Morrell shared a number of examples of how he has used popular culture with Black male youth to develop traditional and media literacies, to build their research skills, and to empower them to address real problems in their neighborhoods. In one example, he described a workshop in which African American adolescents were asked to look at two juxtaposed images of Black males—one a photo of a doctor; the other a photo of a rapper—and to think about: 1) what the images convey about what it means to be a young Black man, 2) what the images say about power, and 3) what messages the images send to others. In another example, he discussed the Hip-Hop Education Center, a place where teens go after school to interact with hip-hop artists and become involved in emceeing, making beats, and learning about the entrepreneurial aspects of the music industry.

Studying popular culture can also give Black male students the tools they need to “deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society.” Discussing popular culture, enabling texts, and counterstories provides young Black males with the opportunity to discuss race and racism in America, develop strategies for how to productively respond to racism and racist encounters, and prepare them for K-12, college, and workplace settings.
The Importance of Cultivating Voice and Agency

“I believe that part of the solution, whether we’re talking about the classroom or the school library or the public library is engaging them and that has to do with cultivating voice…and developing their sense of agency.”

Dr. Ernest Morrell
Teachers’ College
Columbia University

Voice and agency were themes repeated throughout the summit. In his keynote address, Dr. Morrell explained, “The first thing you have to do is ask them what is on their minds and give them the tools to help them say what they have to say in a more powerful way.” For example, Dr. Morrell and his colleagues asked high school students from a largely African American community in South Central Los Angeles, “How is the current economic crisis nationally affecting life at your schools?” These young people spent time after school, on Saturdays, and in the summer collecting surveys of over 1,000 people, interviewing people in the neighborhood, searching statistical databases, learning how to become filmmakers, shooting, editing, and distributing a video, creating PowerPoint presentations, writing reports, and travelling around the community telling people what is wrong with their school system and how they would like it to be fixed. This is the power of voice, of agency. Students are motivated to develop their literacy skills because it empowers them to make demands and to change their communities.

“You can take my life, my mind too.
You don’t have to take my heart.
I’m giving it to you.
But the one thing you will never get is my pen
Because without it,
I am nothing.

12-year old Black male

The Institute for Museum and Library Services and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation made $100,000 grants in November 2011 to eight libraries and four museums to plan and design digital labs where teens can learn to create media. These labs are examples of how libraries can cultivate voice and agency.29

Dr. Tatum, too, emphasized the need to cultivate voice and agency. In his presentation, he described the power of reading and writing to nurture the development of literacy skills, life skills, resiliency, and identity. He shared a number of poems and other texts written by the young men with whom he works. This one, written by a twelve-year-old demonstrates how teens will embrace writing as a tool of voice and agency.

The Importance of Cultivating Voice and Agency

““All young people have a political identity, a yearning sense of injustice that they want to do something about. What we need to do is map their political intensity onto an intellectual trajectory. To ask them, what are you going to do about it and to give them the tools to take action.”

Dr. Ernest Morrell
Teachers’ College
Columbia University

Dr. Tatum, too, emphasized the need to cultivate voice and agency. In his presentation, he described the power of reading and writing to nurture the development of literacy skills, life skills, resiliency, and identity. He shared a number of poems and other texts written by the young men with whom he works. This one, written by a twelve-year-old demonstrates how teens will embrace writing as a tool of voice and agency.29
The Centennial Scholars Program, developed under the leadership of Vice Chancellor Kevin D. Rome, is part of North Carolina Central University’s commitment to creating and sustaining a culture of student success. The mission of the Program is to provide minority male students with relevant academic, professional and social experiences that will stimulate their personal ambition and development in seven areas: academic success, mentorship, identity/self-esteem, leadership, cultural and spiritual enlightenment, community involvement, and a sense of brotherhood.

In 2009, the program launched with 57 freshmen African American male participants. Today, over 500 minority males are members of the Centennial Scholars Program. This number includes a new cohort of 15 transfers, non-traditional and veteran minority male students who have decided to pursue a 4-year degree.

Jason Dorsette, Director of the Program, reports that as students adopt and embrace the concept and title of scholar, program staff see positive correlations between their attitudes, conduct, and behavior both inside and outside of the classroom, and their ability to articulate their thoughts to their professors, peers, and others. Their day-to-day conversations change from discussing the social happenings of hip-hop/pop culture, to more scholarly and educational dialogues and conversations. Program staff also notice a difference in their writing and speaking abilities and their dress changes to reflect their commitment to learning. The young men begin to self-identify as positive contributors to their community and academia, all the while remaining humble and building a sense of accountability and brotherhood amongst themselves.

The Need to Set High Expectations

“We command excellence from our students.”

Vice Chancellor Kevin Rome
North Carolina Central University

“Focus on success.” “Push them beyond their expectations for themselves.” “They expect to be pushed.” “They lose respect for people who let them do what they want.” “Students will meet the expectations that you set.”

Phrases such as these were heard repeatedly throughout the three days of the summit, from the speakers, the participants, and the young men themselves. In their addresses, Dr. Tatum, Dr. Morrell, and Vice Chancellor Rome provided multiple examples of the positive academic and life outcomes that develop when high expectations are combined with powerful texts, opportunities to read, write, and speak with purpose, quality instruction, and ongoing support.

Dr. Tatum explained, “There is no research that says, ‘If I expose struggling African American boys to less they will become excellent readers and writers.’” Unfortunately, many educators and librarians who work with Black male youth have a tendency to lower expectations, to, “turn down the volume” and “expose them to less.” Setting low expectations sanctions silence, stifles intellect, suppresses agency, and hampers future economic growth.

“We think we’re doing irreparable harm when we challenge them, but we’re essentially giving them permission to fight back with their own words and their own ideas.”

Dr. Alfred W. Tatum
University of Illinois-Chicago
The Power of Partnerships

“At the Durham School of the Arts in Durham, NC the librarian received a grant from a university-neighborhood partnership to start a book club for Black males emphasizing the social experience of reading. Twenty eighth graders met weekly for one semester with three Black male students from North Carolina Central University and a Black male teacher. The first book discussed was The Rock and the River by Kekla Magoon. To wrap up the discussion, Magoon visited the students via Skype and led a spirited exchange about character motivation and the plot choices she made as a writer. The librarian observed that many students who would never have read a book on their own were among the most engaged during the author visit. Book discussions such as these that cross generations are examples of the collaborative literacy events that can result from library-community partnerships.

African American Read In

Schools, churches, libraries, bookstores, community and professional organizations, and interested citizens are urged to make literacy a significant part of Black History Month by hosting and coordinating Read-Ins in their communities. Hosting a Read-In can be as simple as bringing together family and friends to share a book, or as elaborate as arranging public readings and media presentations that feature professional African American writers.

In 1990, the first African American Read-In was sponsored by the Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English. In 1991, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) joined in the sponsorship. The Read-In has been endorsed by the International Reading Association. Over a million readers of all ethnic groups, from 50 states, the District of Columbia, the West Indies, and African countries have participated. The goal is to make the celebration of African American literacy a traditional part of Black History Month activities.

Partnerships firmly place the library within the community as a fully participating partner in literacy efforts and help libraries and other organizations avoid duplication of services. They also allow libraries to provide a wider range of services for Black male youth and to connect the young
Training Wheels is an early literacy vehicle that travels to preschools and daycare centers throughout San Joaquin County, California. Each visit includes a storytime where children ages 0-5 and their teachers and caregivers enjoy stories, songs, and poetry.

men and their families to other services such as preventative health care, tutoring, SAT preparation classes, and so forth.

Partnerships serve an outreach function too. Many African American males and their families are unaware of the programs and services libraries offer. Others are unable to take advantage of them because of work schedules, a lack of transportation, or other barriers. Partnerships with community centers, Boys & Girls Clubs, recreation departments, daycare centers, preschools, social service agencies, and health clinics allow libraries to take literacy programs to the young men and their families rather than waiting for them to visit the library.

The Value of Mentors

“One guy called me on my cell phone recently. He said, ‘I’m on a field trip.’ I said, ‘Why are you calling me? You’re on a field trip with your teacher.’ ‘Oh, we take a lunch break, Dr. Tatum. I just wanted to check in on you.’”

Dr. Alfred W. Tatum
University of Illinois-Chicago

As the above quote illustrates, relationships with caring, supportive individuals are important to Black male youth. Throughout the summit, the potential impact of mentors was stressed. The purpose of a mentoring relationship is to provide guidance, pass on knowledge, share experience, provide a background for more sound judgment, and establish friendship. Ernest Johnson, a summit participant who mentors a number of African American male youth, shares, “Being at the schools provides an exciting venue for me to talk with the students about their academic work and their dreams.”

Adult mentors can assist African American male youth with the development of their literacy skills, offer counter-stories, and provide models of positive life outcome trajectories. Students too can be mentors for younger students and even for their peers. As one of the student panelists explained, “I feel more comfortable asking a fellow student a question.” The student being mentored has a positive role model in a similar age range, while the student who is mentoring develops a sense of agency and purpose. Both students acquire a stronger sense of accountability as they develop a feeling of responsibility towards each other.

“Some African American males have an issue with reaching out to get the help they need. And when you have people that want to help you out, you have people who are excited about helping you out, that excites you, that encourages you to do better and work harder.”

Student Panelist

While long-term mentors are important, temporary mentors who share a specialized skill can inspire Black male youth and can increase attendance at library programs. For example, Dr. Morrell suggested inviting “teaching artists” to visit the library and host a program relating to a topic of high interest to young African American men, such as video editing, sound recording, or poetry. As he explained, “…real teaching artists come cheap. See, there are a lot of them that just want to give back. You can get high profile people there in the state of North Carolina or Maryland or wherever you are from. To teaching artists you say, ‘Would you mind coming in and doing a program on video production?’ or ‘Would you mind coming to do a program on beat making?’ And see how many of these young men show up at your door to learn from these teaching artists and these programs.”

These libraries have successfully recruited mentors from the community:

- Chicago Public Library's YOUmedia
- St. Paul Minnesota Public Library
- San Francisco Public Library
- Nashville Tennessee Public Library
- Howard County Maryland Public Library
Characteristics of Effective Library Services for African American Male Youth

“We need to redefine the scope of the library – we’re not just about books, not even about information. We’re about EMPOWERMENT.”

Summit Participant

The characteristics of effective library services for African American male youth emerged from the summit. These characteristics represent the factors that must be in place for public and school libraries to support and advance the literacy of African American male youth. (See Table 1, on page 17).

1. Characteristics of Effective Administrators and Policy-Makers

First and foremost, effective public and school library administrators and policy-makers make meeting the needs of African American male youth a priority. As Vice Chancellor Rome noted during the summit, the literacy gap “can be resolved if it is a priority.” Many African American youth live in communities where school and public libraries are underfunded, collections are minimal, and full-time youth services librarians are scarce. This year 58 of the 124 District of Columbia public schools will not have a librarian. In Philadelphia, most of the public schools do not employ a certified librarian, and more than 140 do not have a library despite research that links increased student reading and comprehension to quality school library programs. Effective administrators and policy-makers provide adequate and equitable funding and employ dedicated staff who know how to develop, implement, and evaluate research-based programs and services aimed at meeting the needs of Black male youth.

Effective administrators and policy-makers examine library policies to ensure that they are responsive to the lived experiences of Black male youth. As Dr. Morrell pointed out in his keynote address, many of the schools and libraries African American male youth attend “have become places where everybody is surveilled, places where there is punishment, where they are frisked before they walk onto campus. They have become places where youth are expected to sit still and be quiet despite the fact that moving, being kinetic [are] natural parts of being an eight-year-old boy or ten-year old boy.” Effective policy-makers know that this kind of atmosphere is not only unwelcoming, but it inhibits literacy development. Instead, policies are developed and implemented that respect the needs of Black male youth and allow them to feel included and connected to the library and its staff.

Developing ongoing partnerships with other like-minded community organizations is key to supporting and advancing the literacy of African American male youth. Many groups are working resolutely on supporting and advancing the literacy of Black male youth, but “their efforts are often too disconnected and too uncoordinated to match the needs of Black male youth.”

“When I was in middle school I would get in trouble for reading a lot. I’d get done doing math, or whatever, so I’d just crack a book open. [And the teacher would say] ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Well, I’m trying to finish a chapter.’ ‘No, it’s not the time for that.’ And, you know, when I got older, I thought back on that and always wondered, why wasn’t it the time for reading? Why wasn’t it the time for reading? Because I would rather me, and my children in the future, to decide when they have free time, to read than to draw on the desk in the classroom or talk to somebody else who is not done.”

Student Panelist
the comprehensive nature of the problem.” While developing collaborative relationships is time-consuming and can be challenging effective policy-makers recognize that partnerships can be productive and beneficial to all concerned.

Effective administrators and policy-makers support ongoing professional development for their staff in areas such as best practice in advancing the literacy of Black male youth, cultural competence, social justice, collaboration, and evidence-based practice. Finally, effective policy-makers advocate at the local, state, and national level for the urgent need to support and fund school and public library programs.

2. Characteristics of Effective Librarians

In order to provide responsive library services to African American male youth, effective librarians:

1. Move beyond the racial and socioeconomic biases that pervade the popular culture and view Black male youth as individuals, not members of a stereotyped group, and

2. Reject the deficit-oriented lens that represents the race, culture, language, and other characteristics of Black male youth as limitations.

Effective librarians focus on understanding the lived experiences of these young men, both inside and outside of school. Their work is characterized by cultural competency, caring, commitment, and affirmation. When asked to describe their ideal library, the student panelists stated that they want, “Happy, happy, happy librarians, not the grumpy ones.” “Librarians who want to help, who are well-informed and know how to answer your questions.” “Librarians you can talk to and who want to talk to you.” “Librarians who aren’t out to get us.”

Like K-12 educators, who Dr. Tatum challenges to take a courageous stance, effective librarians recognize that “they cannot be half-hearted in their efforts.” They know they must be committed to working with Black male youth, to developing relationships with these young men, and to advocating for them. Unfortunately, in many communities there is still a need to justify a focus on the needs of African American males even though the data are clear. “Many of these young males are underperforming on reading and writing assessment and remain disconnected from reading and writing as part of their development.”

ImaginOn—Charlotte, NC

ImaginOn includes programing and space for children and teens as part of a partnership between the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and the Children’s Theatre of Charlotte.
http://www.imaginon.org/

YOUmedia—Chicago, IL

Housed at the Harold Washington Library Center branch of the Chicago Public Library, YOUmedia is self-described as an “…innovative, 21st century teen learning space… created to connect young adults, books, media, mentors, and institutions throughout the city of Chicago in one dynamic space designed to inspire collaboration and creativity.”

http://youmediachicago.org/2-about-us/pages/2-about-us
librarians challenge this kind of thinking, and actively embrace their role in supporting the literacy needs of African American males. They hold themselves and their libraries accountable, engage in ongoing evaluation of resources, services, and programs, and use data to develop responsive services and to advocate for additional resources—both monetary and human.

3. Characteristics of Effective Library Space

Currently, many African American male youth see libraries as hostile and unwelcoming spaces. They “feel like outsiders in library spaces and deem the...library as the sole ‘property’ of the librarian.”

Effective libraries are places where African American male youth feel welcome and included. They are places where they can move about, talk, collaborate, explore, innovate, and socialize. One of the student panelists explained, “...if I’m reading a book and I find something interesting, I want to be able to tell my friend about it and don’t want to be shushed the whole time and get in trouble.”

Effective libraries are also places where Black male youth see their cultural heritage represented, respected and celebrated. Cultural diversity is woven throughout the collection, and in the books on recommended reading lists, showcased in displays, and targeted for book discussions, in the pictures on the walls, and the staff who work in the library.

Effective library spaces extend beyond the four walls of the library to provide both physical and virtual access to resources, services, and programs. Physical library spaces are bright and comfortable, and accommodate activities requiring differing levels of noise from group discussion, to playing video games with friends, to quiet, independent reading. They provide a variety of spaces including reading and study areas, media labs and recording studios, and space for socialization. They support collaboration by including furnishings that are movable and technologies that support interaction. As one student panelist noted, “When you have group projects, you want an area where you can work. I mean bring this table over here and not have people wondering, ‘Why are they moving that table and chairs?’”

The virtual library is also welcoming, engaging, and interactive. It provides an opportunity for Black male youth not only to access information, but also to cultivate voice and agency. It allows for personalization and customization and contains features such as book lists, access to electronic resources, homework help, fun and games, help with issues related to life, links to community agencies, and resources for parents. Communication with librarians is encouraged and facilitated through social media. The design of the virtual library also takes into account that many African American youth and their families access the Internet using mobile devices.

4. Characteristics of Effective Library Resources

Dr. Edwards and her colleagues write, “The low achievement scores of many African American students cannot be blamed on their home literacy environment. Inadequate funding and materials...can also affect student achievement.” Numerous studies have found striking disparities between the access to print resources low-income children have when compared to middle- and high-income children. U.S. Census figures show few poor children have Internet access at home. While half of all children with family incomes of $75,000 or above have Internet access at home, just 15% of those with incomes between $20-25,000 do. In their visits to urban libraries, Celano and Neuman found that users in poor areas often endure long waits just to get on a computer. Once there, they find that their time on the library computer is often limited, averaging between 30 and 60 minutes a day. Celano and Neuman ask, “What can you do in 30 minutes? Not much.”

Effective library resources address both of these inequities and reflect the interests of Black male youth.

Effective library collections include “mirror” and “window” resources. Mirror resources allow African American male youth to see themselves reflected in meaningful, relevant ways and give them the opportunity to explore different aspects of their identities. The resources reflect the variety of individual experiences, interests, and personalities inherent in a group of people rather than focusing on narrow, stereotypical representations.

Window resources allow Black male youth to share in experiences beyond those in their everyday lives.
sources provide Black male youth with access to ideas and situations beyond their own experience, allow them to identify and pursue their interests, motivate them to read and learn, and help them define their place in the world.

Effective library resources also include enabling texts—texts that are developmentally appropriate to both the reading level and the physical and social developmental level of Black male youth—and counterstories. (For more information on enabling texts and counterstories, see page 18 of this report.)

At the Stanford L. Warren Branch of the Durham County Library (NC), one of the librarians invited The Sacrificial Poets, an internationally recognized youth performance poetry team, to lead a poetry workshop at the library. Twenty teens and children attended this workshop, after which the teens were so excited about continuing their writing that the library’s “Teen Floetry Group” was born. This group meets once a month to write, reflect, share ideas, and give constructive feedback. As the poem below demonstrates, the workshops allow Black male teens to find their voices and explore topics that are important to them.

I Am

I am sweet.
I am caring for others.
I am the one you come to in a time of need.
I am a problem solver.
I am the one who gets away from trouble.
I am better but not perfect.
I am quiet.
I am different because I don’t want to be the same.
I am driven.
I am flowing like a wave.
I am changing things.
I am the one you wish you knew.
I am staring into the eyes of evil and I walk away.

Terrance, age 16

“...A lot of young African Americans have access to the Internet, but it’s differential access. They don’t have high-speed access from a computer-like device. They have a little bit of access on their cell phones.”

Dr. Ernest Morrell
Teachers’ College
Columbia University

Technology for consuming and producing information is a central component of an effective library for African American males. Two of the student panelists explained, “There should be technology for everyone. Touch screen computers and televisions, iPads, iPods, Nooks, Kindles, cameras, and Wi-Fi.” “There should be iPads with games on them and TVs with video games, netbooks and tablets.”

Finally, effective library resources reflect the interests of the Black male youth served by the particular library. Effective librarians recognize that the Black male youth they serve are individuals and involve them in the selection of resources that address their specific needs and interests.

5. Characteristics of Effective Library Programs

Much current literacy education focuses on teaching isolated skills that seem only to apply in reading class. Effective library programs move beyond this to enable African American male youth to see the value of literacy skills in the real world in which they engage every day. Such programs give the young men the tools needed to be able to act in their own lives and communities to affect positive change.

To do this, effective programs honor and promote the voices of African American male youth and engage them in activities that are relevant to their lives. This starts with seeking and accepting their input regarding library programs, resources, policies, and space. It also includes setting high expectations for them and communicating the expectation for them to meet those expectations.
that they will be successful. Dr. Morrell explained, “If you do not expect success, they will not be motivated. Expect excellence, and excellence is what you will receive in return.”

Effective programming gives African American male youth tools for self-expression and introduces them to multiple outlets for such expression, including blogging, video and music production, and participating in spoken word performances. By honoring and promoting their voices, effective library programs help young Black males develop a sense of agency and empower them to enact positive change in their personal lives and in their communities. Authentic and relevant programing is collaborative, providing young people with opportunities to learn from each other and to complete activities and projects together.

“I mean they’re geniuses with that cell phone and downloading apps, but not so much when you give them a laptop. How do you put a PowerPoint together? How do you use Microsoft Excel? And those are the kinds of things they end up doing as part of action research.”

Dr. Ernest Morrell
Teachers’ College
Columbia University

Finally, effective literacy programming focuses on families. Parent/Caregiver involvement is crucial and has been shown to be directly related to Black youth’s success in school.8 While some parents/caregivers are aware of how to support literacy development, others are not. This is particularly true for parents who struggle with their own literacy or who have had negative experiences with schools. Responsive libraries fill this gap by providing family literacy programs, as well as literacy programs for adults.

Intergenerational programs such as father/son or mother/son book clubs are also beneficial. These programs build the textual lineages that Alfred Tatum describes and also help build a bridge between the home and the library.
Table 1. Characteristics of Effective Library Services for African American Male Youth
Developed by Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Casey H. Rawson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Administrators and Policy-Makers</th>
<th>Librarians</th>
<th>Library Space</th>
<th>Library Resources</th>
<th>Library Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To provide the necessary infrastructure for developing and delivering quality library services to African American male youth</td>
<td>To provide a welcoming place for African American male youth to increase and express their literacy</td>
<td>To nurture the resolve of African American male youth, to help them reconcile their different identities, and to reimagine their place in the world</td>
<td>To connect literacy to the real world and enable African American male youth to act in their own communities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support dedicated staff</td>
<td>Culturally competent</td>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>Meaningful</td>
<td>Honor &amp; promote voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide adequate and equitable funding</td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Respectful</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Develop agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engage in research-based practice</td>
<td>Affirming</td>
<td>Responsive</td>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>Increase engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop responsive policy</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Developmentally appropriate</td>
<td>Set high expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foster community partnerships</td>
<td>Accountable</td>
<td>Welcoming</td>
<td>Enabling</td>
<td>Provide authentic &amp; relevant experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide ongoing professional development</td>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td></td>
<td>Foster community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advocate at the local, state and national level</td>
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</table>
Foundational Knowledge Needed by LIS Professionals

During the summit, it became clear that to address the literacy needs of African American male youth LIS professionals need a strong foundational background. The responsibility for developing this knowledge rests with schools of library and information science, national and state associations such as the ALA, AASL, ALSC, PLA, and YALSA, state library agencies, school districts, and other similar organizations. Individual librarians too must take responsibility for their own professional growth by forming professional learning networks, seeking out professional development opportunities, taking leadership roles in professional organizations, and conducting action research. (See Appendix B for a list of Recommended Professional Reading.)

Knowledge of Best Practice for Advancing the Literacy of Black Male Youth

Librarians cannot support the literacy development of Black male youth unless they understand it. Research on best practice in the literacy instruction of Black male youth, including effective pedagogy, curriculum planning, and text selection must be part of the professional repertoire of both school and public library professionals. Some of the key factors include:

- Using culturally responsive approaches to literacy instruction;
- Selecting and mediating texts which are meaningful, legitimate, powerful, and developmentally appropriate;
- Recognizing the connection between literacy and identity development;
- Situating literacy instruction in real world issues that are relevant to Black male youth;
- Cultivating reading as a social activity;
- Connecting literacy to meaningful and purposeful activism;
- Incorporating Black popular culture such as hip-hop as an instructional tool;
- Building and creating reading and writing lineages;
- Strengthening assessment strategies; and
- Setting high expectations.

Ability to Identify Powerful Texts

“One of the most challenging things for teachers I’ve worked with over time is how to select or identify texts that can lead to positive life trajectories or that can lead to a smile. There is something deeply human about a kid just enjoying a piece of literature.”

Dr. Alfred W. Tatum
University of Illinois-Chicago

The selection of texts to use with African American male youth matters. Dr. Tatum explained, “So people will ask, ‘Does it matter what text they are reading as long as they are reading?’ Absolutely, it matters. Absolutely, it matters because young boys want to know if the text is legitimate, not if it is at the right [reading] level.”

Selecting powerful texts requires understanding what makes a writing powerful, reading widely, and being culturally competent. Table 2, on page 21 provides a rubric, based on Dr. Tatum’s concept of enabling texts, to aid with the selection of powerful texts.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is an essential component of providing effective library services to Black male youth. Patricia Montiel Overall defines cultural competence as the “ability to recognize the significance of culture in one’s own life and in the lives of others; and to come to know and respect diverse cultural backgrounds and characteristics through interaction with individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups; and to fully integrate the culture of diverse groups into services, work, and institut-
Cultural competence includes an understanding of funds of knowledge, defined as “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being.” Cultural competency also encompasses an understanding of racial identity development, and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory provides a framework for helping us recognize and confront racism as it is manifested in society, schools, and libraries, especially as it affects access to academic excellence.

Culture competency is best developed through first-hand experience with diverse populations. For LIS students, service learning, a pedagogy that integrates professional learning and academic curriculum has been found to be an effective strategy, for helping students develop a deeper understanding and respect for cultural differences. Practicing librarians find that the best way to develop cultural competence is to become a field researcher; that is, to participate in community activities, dialogue with patrons, seek out community organizations, essentially to become an observer, listener, and reflective practitioner. Attending workshops held by organizations such as Teaching Tolerance (http://www.tolerance.org/professional-development) or the Racial Equity Institute (http://rei.racialequityinstitute.org/) is also beneficial and can provide librarians with the opportunity to examine and reflect on their own biases and prejudices.

Teaching Tolerance, founded in 1991 by the Southern Poverty Law Center, is “dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation’s children.” The organization provides free educational materials and professional development opportunities to teachers and other school practitioners in the U.S. and abroad. (http://www.tolerance.org)

Dr. Morrell reminded summit participants, “More Black males died in a decade in the United States from gunshots than all the casualties in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan combined. This is not inevitable. This is a choice. As long as we think of it as an inevitability, we can absolve ourselves of the responsibility for not making the choice to do something to make it right. It is going to take all of us dedicating our lives to this. This is justice. This is fairness. Solidarity leads to action.”

Often librarians are hesitant to adopt a social justice position for fear of alienating the core user group, or appearing to favor one user group over another. It is important to remember that developing services for Black male youth, and other socially excluded people, not only benefits the previously excluded, but the already included as well. Programs and services that are more closely tailored to meet the needs of the entire community are more likely to provide better services, resources, staff, and opening hours to all of its users.
That said, as Dr. Tatum states, "switching the focus to the literacy needs of all students prevents or obscures the literacy development of certain students...The humanistic claim that we must focus on all is less humanistic in practice if the literacy needs of certain students are not fully addressed." Libraries must recognize that inequities do exist, and must have the courage to address them in ways that speak to the needs of their respective community.

**Experience with Evidence-Based Practice**

Though individual libraries and librarians are successfully supporting Black male literacy, a body of research-based evidence is needed to help move the broader library community beyond thinking about the problem, to taking action. Evidence-based practice is “an approach to information practice that promotes the collection, interpretation and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian observed, and research-derived evidence.”

Evidence-based practice offers four key benefits to libraries working to address the literary gap:

1. It provides evidence at the local community level that library initiatives make a visible contribution to the literacy development of Black male youth, and that the community can see the real impacts;

2. It convinces administrators, policy-makers, and community funders that money invested in library services and programs for Black male youth are worth it;

3. It demonstrates the librarian’s commitment to addressing both the literacy achievement gap and the life outcomes gap for Black male youth; and

4. It helps librarians plan programs and services that are more effective.

**Expand the LIS Research Agenda**

During the summit, it became clear that the LIS community has conducted little research focused on libraries, literacy, and African American male youth. Kafi Kumasi, assistant professor at Wayne State University's School of Library and Information Science, summarized the research gaps in her presentation and provided the framework shown in Figure 1 to guide the work of LIS researchers.

**Figure 1. Research Gaps: African American Males, Literacy, and Libraries**

Developed by Dr. Kafi Kumasi

The framework features two dimensions, each of which contain five major areas where LIS scholars might focus their attention in order to help close the research knowledge gap pertaining to African American male youth literacy. The first dimension outlines some of the conceptual research gaps, while the second dimension outlines some of the methodological research gaps.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides a healthy psyche (Tatum 2009)</td>
<td>• Leads Black male youth to look within&lt;br&gt;• Shows Black male youth defining themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides a modern awareness of the real world (Tatum, 2009)</td>
<td>• Connects to issues/questions that students find essential today&lt;br&gt;• Takes place w/in the context of their life experiences&lt;br&gt;• Deals with issues that are important to Black male youth&lt;br&gt;• Presents “real” environments/conditions Black male youth face inside and outside school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on the collective struggles of African Americans (Tatum, 2009)</td>
<td>• Provides insight into issues related to social justice&lt;br&gt;• Allows Black male youth to take a critical look at their oppression &amp; oppressors and to examine the academic &amp; social ills they face&lt;br&gt;• Contains content that will cause them to take action in their own lives&lt;br&gt;• Challenges them to think about their existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serves as road map for being, doing, thinking, and acting (Tatum, 2009)</td>
<td>• Reflects an improved human condition&lt;br&gt;• Suggests steps/strategies/supports for improving life&lt;br&gt;• Speaks to the power of the individual and of the collective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizes, honors, &amp; nurtures multiple identities (Tatum, 2009)</td>
<td>• Academic&lt;br&gt;• Cultural&lt;br&gt;• Economic&lt;br&gt;• Gendered&lt;br&gt;• Personal&lt;br&gt;• Social&lt;br&gt;• Sexual&lt;br&gt;• Communal&lt;br&gt;• National&lt;br&gt;• International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates resiliency (Tatum, 2009)</td>
<td>• Focuses on self-reliance&lt;br&gt;• Focuses on self-determination&lt;br&gt;• Shows Black males as problem solvers&lt;br&gt;• Challenges victim mentality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is interesting and provocative (Tatum, 2009)</td>
<td>• Thematically engaging&lt;br&gt;• Complex; multi-layered&lt;br&gt;• Developmentally appropriate&lt;br&gt;• Fast moving and provocative&lt;br&gt;• Taps into feelings, imagination, and intellectual curiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoids caricatures (Tatum, 2009)</td>
<td>• Hoopsters&lt;br&gt;• Fatherless son&lt;br&gt;• Gang recruit&lt;br&gt;• Truant&lt;br&gt;• User of poor grammar &amp; raw language&lt;br&gt;• Rapper&lt;br&gt;• Drug user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes a mentor or role model</td>
<td>• Provides guidance or offers wisdom to the protagonist&lt;br&gt;• Often an adult or elderly member of the African American community&lt;br&gt;• Usually not didactic or preachy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conceptual Research Gaps

The conceptual research gaps point out various disciplinary areas of knowledge that have not been thoroughly integrated into the theoretical knowledge base of LIS scholarship, but that relate indirectly to African American male literacy development. Most of the conceptual gaps that have been identified are drawn from foundational ideas that can be attributed to scholars in the field of education and related disciplines.

Below are a few of the basic premises related to literacy, culture, and learning that are fundamental to any effort to develop a transformative research agenda in LIS that can positively impact and reflect the lives of African American males.

1. Literacy is a social (as opposed to strictly cognitive) practice that is culturally, socially, and historically, constructed;
2. Historical and contemporary racism are symbiotically linked to the institutions of schooling and the institutions that shape educational research among other academic disciplines; and
3. Culture shapes learning, cognition, and information seeking in ways that should be explicitly attended to in the design of learning spaces such as classrooms and libraries.

Each of the above premises cuts across the five conceptual domains listed in Figure 1. The key texts that elaborate on these premises are listed below in a selected bibliography of resources compiled by Dr. Kumasi.

1. Ethnic Identity Development

2. Critical Race/Whiteness

3. Digital Divide

4. Cultural Styles of Teaching and Learning

5. Out-of-School Literacy Frameworks

Methodological Research Gaps

The methodological research gaps outlined in Figure 1 represent some of the research methods that are underutilized in LIS, but that align with and help capture the indigenous knowledge and worldviews of non-dominant cultures, including African Americans.

These research methodologies also have merits because many of them are based on notions of praxis and voice. Praxis has to do with merging theory into practice. Voice can be seen as a form of counter storytelling that allows marginalized groups a space to name their own racialized realities and have those realities legitimized in formalized spaces, such as academic research.

An example of an underutilized research method LIS scholars could employ in a powerful study of African American literacy through libraries might be participatory action research. This method is a recognized form of experimental research that focuses on the effects of the researcher’s direct actions of practice within a participatory community with the goal of improving the performance quality of the community or an area of concern.
An example of a participatory action research study in the library might involve a school or youth services librarian examining his/her own practices within a library book club program that is developed specifically to help African American male youth develop a sense of agency in solving real world problems that are depicted in the literature.

Dr. Morrell’s work with urban youth perhaps best illustrates the power of using participatory action research methods coupled with popular cultural themes as a means of building on those traditional academic literacies that are sanctioned in schools and other formal education spaces such as libraries. In a 2005 article describing the power of participatory action research in his own study, Dr. Morrell noted that:

When looking at the various types of reading, writing, and speaking associated with the process of engaging in youth participatory action research, it becomes immediately obvious that the literacy practices parallel, or even exceed what would be considered as desirable literacy practices in a primary or secondary literacy curriculum.

Participatory action research is just one of the methods that LIS scholars might avail themselves of in their effort to understand, support, and develop the literacy potential of African American male youth. During the summit, the attendees were encouraged to become familiar with this important body of knowledge as a means of becoming culturally competent LIS researchers and practitioners.

**Summit Recommendations**

“If we have the will...we can create the way...Use your voices to elevate this issue so that people simply cannot ignore it.”

Chancellor Charlie Nelms  
North Carolina Central University

Over the course of the summit, many concrete ideas were proposed for how each of the various stakeholder groups might take action to affect positively the lives of young African American males. These suggestions, presented in list form below, should be considered as merely a starting point for future efforts and partnerships.

**School and Public Librarians**

- Create inviting, welcoming, helpful and supportive library environments. Ensure that all library staff are friendly, caring, knowledgeable, and culturally competent.

  Consider:
  - offering or allowing food
  - providing tutors (especially tutors who are close to the students’ ages)
  - creating a “no-shushing” zone where students are free to talk or otherwise make noise
  - choosing comfortable furniture
  - keeping the library as brightly-lit as possible
  - keeping the library uncluttered, with space to move around
  - having space for group work
  - playing music
  - incorporating a media lab

- Work with youth, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members to identify and select rich and enabling texts for the library collection and to be used for literacy instruction and support.

- Write publishers to demand enabling texts featuring diverse characters, and have your students write as well.

- Make a commitment to including authors and characters of color in library collections and on reading lists.
✓ Be intentional in recommending texts to African American males.
✓ Collaborate to provide authentic, real-world, relevant opportunities for literacy engagement. Consider partnerships with:
  o teachers
  o local public libraries and schools
  o universities
  o parents
  o detention centers
  o local religious or charitable organizations
  o youth-focused groups such as the YMCA or Boys and Girls Clubs
  o corporations
✓ Start book discussion groups for African American male youth.
✓ Start or host a mentoring program for African American males.
✓ Leverage the power of pop culture in program planning.
✓ Ask African American male youth what they enjoy and bring it into the library
✓ Actively advocate for excellence and high expectations in literacy goals for African American male youth.
✓ Involve African American male youth in decision-making for the library, including collection development, programing, and technology decisions.
✓ Ask African American youth what they would change about the library, and incorporate their suggestions.
✓ Create programming that draws African American male youth into the library and engages them. Consider:
  o author visits (especially authors of color)
  o “open mic” nights
  o video game programs or competitions
  o performances (music, dance, theater, etc.)
✓ Arrange or display the collection in such a way that students are exposed to a wide variety of materials in order to pique their interest. Change displays often.
✓ Put quotes from enabling texts on book receipts, report cards, bookmarks, etc. to encourage young men to seek out these texts.
✓ Provide young library users with visual examples of a wide variety of readers: photograph people from all walks of life reading and display these photographs prominently.
✓ Offer technology in the library. In school libraries, instead of locking it up or reserving it only for classes, make it accessible to students.
✓ Emphasize writing as an essential element of literacy. Give library users opportunities to write, and share your own writings with them.
✓ Seek out and apply for grant money to be used specifically for African American male youth.
✓ Develop a professional development curriculum addressing culturally competent service for the library board, all library staff (including paraprofessionals and security guards), volunteers, and friends of the library. Include current research and best practices.
✓ Stay abreast of research into best practices for educating African American males by subscribing to and reading related academic journals.
✓ Collect and analyze data within the library related to African American males. Use this data to make decisions and advocate for change.
✓ Conduct action research within your school or library. Publish the results to let the library community know what is working and not working on the ground level.
✓ Recruit members of the community who support the literacy development of Black male youth, such as spoken word and hip-hop artists, recording artists, ministers, teachers, professional athletes, law enforcement officials, etc., to act as mentors, to provide programming, to become involved in the library.
✓ Provide programs for families.
Researchers & Educators

- Read widely within LIS and education-related publications to become familiar with existing scholarship related to African American males and literacy.
- Build a research agenda and conduct research on the literacy needs of African American males from early ages through higher education. Consider
  - Surveying young Black males who read, those who are struggling, and those who are reluctant readers to determine the best strategies for reaching and informing them about reading and library programs.
  - Researching the media consumption of Black males to learn how it impacts their reading and how it can be used to support their literacy development and create positive change.
  - Incorporating multiple research methods, critical perspectives, and interdisciplinary approaches.
- Build strong and sustainable partnerships between library educators and public and school libraries.
- Support implementation of research into practice and sharing of effective practices, including a mentoring network for professionals.
- Share the results of your research and/or existing scholarship with African American males and their parents.
- Advocate within your institution for a required MLS course in cultural competency.
- Aggressively recruit diverse students into graduate library schools.
- Document and disseminate successful programs so that they can be replicated and adapted by people of passion elsewhere in the country who will mold them into their local context.

K-12 Educators

- Lead professional development that includes anti-racism and cultural awareness components.
- Read and disseminate recent research on best practices related to the literacy needs of African American male youth.
- Create and sustain a dialogue between African American male students and their teachers. Be open to their honest evaluations.
- Train Black male students to be part of the dialogue: involve them in advocacy, social action, and educational reform efforts.
- Involve parents in the literacy education of their children. Educate them about their role and give them the tools to advocate for change.
- Emphasize writing as an essential element of literacy. Have your students write often, and share your own writing with them.
- Write publishers to demand enabling texts featuring diverse characters, and have your students write as well.
- Collect and analyze data related to your African American male students. Use this data to make decisions and advocate for change.
- Do your own action research within your school or classroom. Publish the results to let the education community know what is working and not working on the ground level.
- Establish partnerships for meaningful practicum and student teaching experiences in diverse communities.

Authors and Publishers

- Increase the diversity of reviewers, including avenues for youth voices, ethnic and minority reviewers.
- Facilitate connections between readers and authors, especially authors of color.
- Write and publish books that are driven by authors and readers instead of the perceived market needs.
- Write and publish more enabling texts and books that include authentic voices.
Administrators and Policymakers

✓ Commit to providing equitable funding for the community of African American male youth you serve. This may involve earmarking existing funds for materials, programs, and services for these young men as well as seeking out and applying for grants to increase your organization’s spending on underserved groups.

✓ Provide and maintain physical space for African American male youth and the staff members who serve them. Ask African American males what they would like this space to look like, and use their suggestions.

✓ Offer or require ongoing professional development focused on how your staff can best serve young African American males.

✓ Provide time and resources for your staff to attend external professional development and conferences related to issues of equity.

✓ Facilitate the creation of strong partnerships between your organization and others serving African American young men.

✓ Work with your staff to create explicit policies related to:
  - Noise tolerance in the library
  - In-library use and checkout of technology
  - Purchasing enabling and diverse texts
  - Respect for diversity.

Professional Organizations

✓ Highlight research, programs, and resources related to closing the literacy gap in newsletters and publications.

✓ Partner with like-minded organizations to advocate for equitable library services for Black male youth.

✓ Reach out to the editors of magazines, television networks such as BET, radio stations whose audience is primarily African Americans, as well as the sports and music industry, to engage them in addressing the literacy needs of Black male youth.

✓ Sponsor research by providing competitive grant funding to address issues of equity, such as the American Library Association’s Diversity Research Award.

✓ Include workshops, seminars, and presentations on closing the literacy gap for African American males at your organization’s conferences or annual meetings. Highlight these events and schedule them carefully to ensure maximum attendance.

Conclusion

The late civil rights icon, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once stated that “an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” This same idea can be applied to what has been described as the civil rights issue of the 21st century—the quality of education available to poor and historically underrepresented groups. As the Summit report has illustrated, African American males are disproportionately affected by failing schools and a lack of quality educational opportunities. Consequently, their life outcomes and opportunities are also disproportionately constrained compared to their peers in the dominant white cultural group.

Dr. King would likely argue that this issue can and does affect us all; whether we are Black, White, rich, poor, gay, straight, Christian or atheist. If Dr. King were alive today, he would likely use his influence to summon people from all spheres of life to work collectively towards ameliorating this uniquely American civil rights issue. Likewise, the Summit on African American male youth literacy was held to bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds to help solve this literacy and education crisis of the new millennium.
“Love must be in the equation for all of these solutions. We must rise to a level of indignation about social injustice to truly effect change.”

Dr. Ernest Morrell
Teachers’ College
Columbia University

While all of the recommendations put forth during the Summit are worthy of action, there are three essential ingredients that must be present for any of them to be activated and work. Those three ingredients are: love, indignation, and accountability.

Love is the foremost ingredient because it is this emotion that activates the second ingredient, indignation. One has to have a sense of genuine love and concern about the welfare and life outcomes of African American males in order to be outraged enough about the current educational injustices to be moved to action. Genuine love leaves little room for cultural deficit perspectives about African American males, which might suggest that there is something innate or inevitable about their social plight.

Once love has sparked a sense of indignation and outrage, the final ingredient accountability comes into play. The owners of educational oppression must be told about the irrationality of their actions and policies that (either explicitly or implicitly) further this racial literacy achievement gap. Accountability must also translate into holding high expectations for African American male youth and believing in their unique cultural funds of knowledge.

Finally, we must also hold ourselves accountable as an LIS community and work towards keeping this issue at the forefront of our collective consciousness. Otherwise, like many well-meaning efforts, we run the risk of doing more talking than acting. These efforts must become institutionalized within major professional associations including the American Library Association and the Association of Library and Information Science Education. Only then will the library community have the political will and the material resources to effect positive change towards African American male youth literacy development.

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Appendix B. Recommended Professional Reading


Additional resources can be found at Bridge to Literacy, http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/
(Endnotes)


5 Ibid.


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17 Alfred Tatum, Summit Keynote Address


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