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## Building Resiliency with Students of Color During the Pandemic: Providing Remote After-School Activities

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## **Building Resiliency with Students of Color During the Pandemic: Providing Remote After-School Activities**

### **Abstract:**

*As two Black male teachers, we knew the risks for our Black male students in our culture and the importance of keeping them safe and attending school. Keeping our students involved in our school community took on a new urgency when the pandemic hit and the country struggled with racial issues after the shooting of unarmed Black men and women. We adapted our after-school mentoring and leadership programs (that had been f2f) for young Black males and transformed them to after-school remote platforms. Secondary students participated in a remote football practice and training program. They were able to socialize with friends, receive support from their coaches, and retain academic eligibility. Elementary students enrolled in a leadership group were able to maintain connections with peers and mentors in one-on-one or small-group sessions. Our remote adaptations enabled our Black male students to connect with our school community during national crises that significantly impacted the Black community.*

### **Who We Are**

At P. K. Yonge (PKY), Marcus taught computer science in the secondary division and served as head football coach, while Johnny taught 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics in the elementary division (see the introductory piece to this journal for detailed information about our K-12 school). As Black male teachers, we represented the small percentage (2%) of Black men teaching in public schools currently, and we had a strong commitment to supporting young Black males at our school. Hence, prior to the pandemic, we were both engaged in inquiry cycles that focused on initiatives to support our Black high-school and upper-elementary students respectively. Marcus was investigating the influence of an after-school mentoring group he had started for Black teenagers. Similarly, Johnny was investigating the influence of a leadership group for Black 4<sup>th</sup> grade boys to promote their participation in the elementary classroom.

When our inquiries were interrupted by our school's transition to emergency remote instruction, we were both dismayed by the disproportional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people of color (Kirksley, et. al, 2021). Black families were more likely to be exposed to the virus because they were overrepresented in the low-wage, essential workforce at the front lines, and many of our students' parents worked as low-wage health care workers for our community's university medical center. Furthermore, we knew that the young men and boys we had been working with in our mentoring and leadership groups

were struggling not only with the pandemic, but with the racial climate in our country. As the pandemic forced the country into lockdown and closed schools, the killing of several unarmed Black men and women—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd—spurred widespread protests and demonstrations demanding reforms of policing practices that have harmed Black people for centuries. In the United States system of justice, a Black man is six times more likely to be incarcerated than a white man (Galea & Abdalla, 2020). As teachers, we knew the risks for our Black male students in this country and the importance of keeping them in schools prior to COVID-19. Yet, keeping our students in school took on a new urgency when the pandemic hit.

Although, our faculty expressed concerns regarding Black students as we transitioned to remote emergency instruction, we wanted to keep these young men connected and involved in our school community when they no longer could physically come to school. Hence, we adapted our pre-pandemic inquiry efforts to address this need. We collaborated to explore the following questions, “What happens to our Black male students when they are moved onto remote learning platforms for school?” and “Can after-school remote programs help strengthen connections with Black male students during the pandemic crisis?”

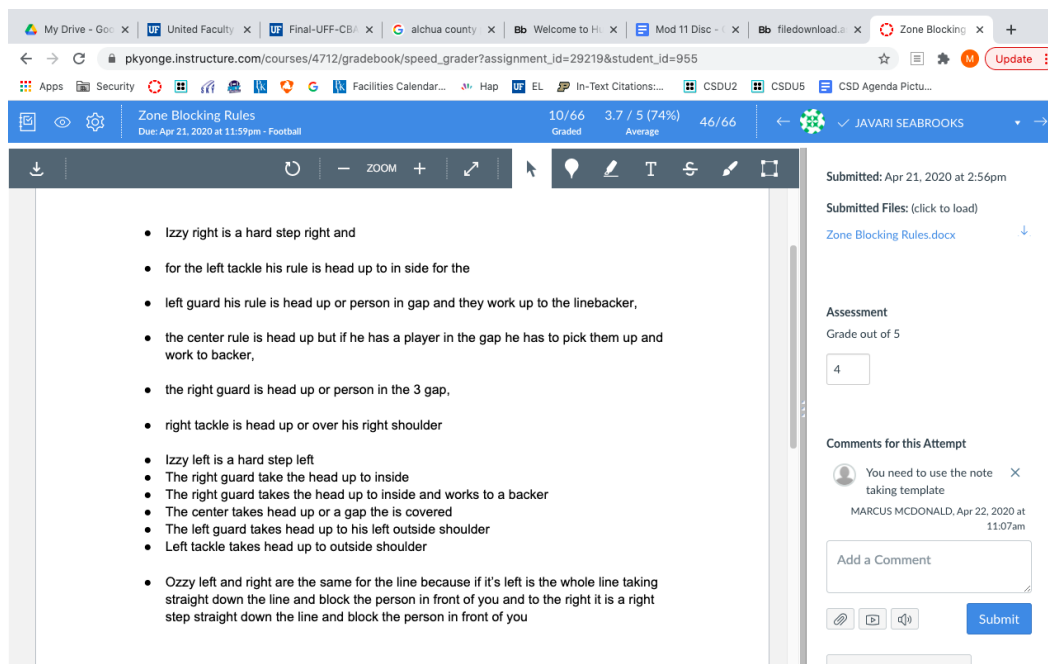
### **What We Did**

We began this pandemic cycle of inquiry by adapting the mentoring and leadership programs we had in place for our secondary and elementary students. We collected student data in a variety of ways: monitoring attendance online, maintaining notes on students’ comments on academic, social and emotional concerns; and maintaining records of conversations with students’ caregivers. We taught different age groups and designed different programs with the same goal: keeping our young Black men connected to the school community.

### **Canvas Football Training and Practice**

The young Black men, who participated in Marcus’s mentoring group, had also been members of the varsity or junior varsity football team. They greatly valued football, not only for joys of the sport, but also for providing social connections with their peers. As a coach, Marcus also knew that football provided motivation to remain academically eligible for school. Marcus knew he needed to fill the gap created in his students’ lives when high-school sporting events were cancelled during the country’s lockdown. Marcus reimaged his mentoring group as a remote learning after-school football program for the varsity and junior varsity teams. He enlisted his assistant coaches to help him design a Canvas Football Training and Practice website (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*Canvas Football Training and Practice Website*



Each Canvas module included videos, graphic resources and text designed to engage students with the sport they loved, albeit remotely. A quiz to check for understanding and holding students accountable for participating in “football practice” remotely was also included in the website design. The modules included both information relevant to the entire team, as well as differentiated instruction for each position. Students answered questions, analyzed video- recordings of football plays and posted responses online. In addition, the website contained incentives to stay physically fit. A Strength and Speed Training module included a few competitive activities, such as a Push Up Club. Players were asked to complete a plyometric workout that could be done at home and posted their progress online, prompting them to compete and interact with one another virtually.

Classroom Teachers were made aware of the program and asked to contact the football coaching staff if a student missed one of their academic remote instruction sessions. In this way, if a student did not show up to an academic class on Zoom but showed up for after-school remote football, Marcus could discuss the importance of continuing their academic learning to participate in virtual football practice (and name the teacher and the class).

This provided incentive for students to remain engaged in the online academic instruction that occurred during the lockdown.

Nevertheless, Marcus noted the tension felt by teachers during this time, as he recalled in one of his posts on *RLL*.

I believe the teachers are feeling a certain stress, a certain pressure to perform as if we were in school. I don't believe that stress is necessarily coming from administration, I believe that it's just stress to hold the status quo. *To do things as if we were doing things normally.* ... But I'm just like, "Do the kids need that? *Right now, with what's going on, do we have to really hammer these kids about completing [academic] projects?*" [Marcus, Prompt 2, April 2020].

Marcus persisted, however, keeping relationships with his students and providing support.

#### **Fourth-Fifth Grade Leadership Group Goes Remote**

As Marcus reimagined his mentoring group, Johnny reimagined his work with members of his leadership group. He modified his efforts to include as a series of one-on-one individual contacts, while he simultaneously worked with his 4th/5th grade-level team to organize after-school groups using remote instruction platforms for tutoring. The focus of these voluntary afterschool groups was initially conceived to provide academic tutoring through engaging, active problem solving across all subject areas.

Johnny, however, realized that the lockdown scenarios that his students were facing presented numerous challenges to the Black male students, who had been in his leadership group. He purposefully reached out to these students through e-mails and phone calls to encourage them to participate in these new, remote, after-school learning opportunities. Johnny saw these purposive one-on-one contacts as critical for several members of his leadership group, who were home alone during the day because their caregivers were working. Another one of his leadership students stayed at his grandmother's house during the day, in a rural area, while his single mother worked; he had no internet connection during those times.

One-on-one contact became essential to maintaining connections with members of his leadership group. He also provided his personal home phone number to members of his leadership group to facilitate easier one-on-one connection. He also took student phone calls in the evenings, as students or

parents reached out to him. He recalled one example, of phone conversations with working with a mother, who was a nurse, working long hours:

So then the mom and I finally figured out how to get into zoom. So, we had a zoom meeting with her son. We took about 30 minutes and walked through the steps, what was expected [from the student]. Then the issue became that the student wasn't doing his work. He wasn't getting on his Chromebook or he was getting on, but not doing his work. So, we have another conversation with his mom. We needed her help to give him some structure for his learning. [Interview, June, 2020]

Johnny also noted that the magnitude of issues these students were experiencing often overwhelmed academic efforts.

Traditionally speaking, schools prioritize instruction, curriculum and student performance over other qualitative measurements in students' student's home lives, their mental and emotional well-being, and ensuring resources for struggling students to meet equity needs. I have a couple students that have not turned in much work. It's tough to connect to parents because there are other higher-priority issues they are coping with: avoiding getting sick, maintaining work and income, checking on elderly family members. (John, Prompt 1, March, 2020).

Johnny also had students call for personal conversations, especially during times when they were home alone. Johnny's calls and Zoom sessions frequently became the opportunity for personal conversations and emotional support. Furthermore, when leadership group members attended his afterschool mathematics problem solving club, he intentionally created space for them to talk about their daily lives and the experiences of being male and Black in the midst of both a global pandemic and the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

### **What We Learned**

We learned that when internet connections were not working, particularly when using Zoom or Canvas, we needed to reach out by phone or a home visit. Typically, our IT staff could or had provided "hotspot" connections, but we often needed to provide additional guidance on the phone or in person to keep our students engaged. The research evidence regarding the benefits of participating in afterschool and extracurricular activities is abundant, but we needed to devote extra time to enable student participation. We knew that students who participate generally show higher levels of academic achievement, a more positive level of socialization, fewer behavioral

incidents, a stronger sense of identity with their school, and are more likely to continue with a post-secondary education (Hanline, 2018; Himelfarb, Lac, & Baharav, 2014; Marchetti, Wilson, & Dunham, 2016; Morris, 2015; Tillery et. al, 2013). From our pandemic cycle of inquiry, we learned that these efforts can be maintained during crisis conditions and acquire an even greater importance in keeping vulnerable students actively involved in their school communities.

Our efforts to reimagine our mentoring and leadership groups as novel after-school remote instruction programs coupled with individual one-on-one contact proved successful for most of the students we were serving in these programs. For example, participating in the remote football practice and training program helped students stay in school and retain academic eligibility. At the end of the year, 96% percent of the students on the football team, many of whom participated in Marcus's mentoring group prior to the pandemic, maintained their eligibility. Only three of the 68 students were ruled ineligible. Further, all but one student in Johnny's leadership group kept connections with him throughout the pandemic, either one-on-one or by attending his after-school math problem-solving sessions, or both. In contrast, student school attendance during the pandemic indicated that approximately 25% of students, predominately from low income homes, "disengaged" from school, neither attending remote learning or face-to-face instruction (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020).

We also recognized the tension involved as Black male teachers as we saw systemic inequities beyond our immediate control. While we were happy our efforts appeared to have met with some success, we were not satisfied. Analysis of interviews we completed as a part of our school's remote inquiry learning program (described in the detail in the introductory article to this issue) illuminated the complexity and the magnitude of the problems involved in keeping our students engaged. Throughout the pandemic, there were many problems we had to solve that had to do with the opportunity gap that existed for our students. Educational researchers such as Boykin and Noguera (2011), Ladson-Billings (2007), and Milner (2010) use the term "opportunity gap" to reflect the fact that "the inequalities that exist in schools are a direct consequence of the inequalities that exist within our society, encompassing systematic disparities in health care, wealth, education, affordable housing, quality child care, school funding, teacher quality, and curricula" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020, p. 15). In this example, some of our Black students from low-income homes either had weak internet access to the internet or unfamiliarity with using the remote platforms necessary to participate effectively. In this case, no remote after school program, no matter how innovative and engaging we designed it to be, would work.

As our inquiry illuminated several problems of pandemic schooling associated with the opportunity gap, it also illuminated our limitations in bringing a Black perspective to bear on surfacing these problems (and doing something about them). As two of only seven Black male teachers on the faculty at PKY, it was clear that there was not enough of us to go around in order to make connections with every student of color so they had teachers who looked like them, who were looking out for their well-being throughout the pandemic. Johnny noted that he is the only Black male teacher in the elementary school. He reflected:

A lot of the solution is to transform schools by having more people of color in positions where they're teaching kids of color. [We need a] round table—of school board leaders, community members and curriculum creators at the table. ... Community members that are invested in the children, because they don't want these kids to be dropouts, because they want them to get good jobs. [Interview, Summer, 2020]

Through this pandemic cycle of inquiry, we were reminded that as Black male teachers, we can work within our school system as it currently exists to impact students of color in our local context, but we cannot change the system itself alone. More teachers and educational leaders of color are needed at the table to address the inequities that existed in schools before, and that were exacerbated by, COVID-19. Inquiring during the pandemic renewed our commitment to taking part in, and leading, such efforts.

### **Important Take-Away**

Systematically studying our practice during the pandemic created the space and opportunity for us to adjust programs we had designed to support our Black male students. At both the secondary and elementary school levels, we designed programs to connect with our students in meaningful ways during the abrupt shift to emergency, remote instruction during the Spring of 2020. In the process, we resurfaced issues of opportunity and equity that have always existed in schools and were being magnified by the pandemic. These issues need to be continually addressed in a myriad of ways, ranging from one-on-one contacts to mentoring groups that can function before and after the school day. As Black males, we would prefer that these matters be surfaced and addressed in supportive contexts. Such efforts could make teaching more appealing to Black males as a profession that promotes social justice in meaningful ways.



These issues reminded us that the ultimate goal of engaging in practitioner research “always and in every context is to enhance students’ learning and life chances for participation in and contribution to a diverse and democratic society” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 146). We will continue to study our own practice to increase the learning and life chances of every student with whom we work, and encourage teacher researchers everywhere to remember that this is the reason we inquire.

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