

This is me

A handy guide for schools to help young black men thrive

By Androulla Harris and Ramone Whittle

The context: young black men's mental health

Young black men are overrepresented in more restrictive mental health settings and in the justice system, at a rate which has worsened in the last 10 years. Yet, at age 11, young black boys are not more likely to be identified with a diagnosable condition (Morrison Gutman *et al.*, 2015). By the time they become young adults, why are young men more likely to be identified as in mental health crisis?

Young black men growing up in the UK are more likely to face multiple significant risk factors for poor mental health (Khan *et al.*, 2017).

- Living in poverty
- Housing insecurity or homelessness
- Difficulties at school and subsequent reduced access to opportunities
- Experiences of racism 'wear down' their resilience
- Living in unsafe neighbourhoods
- Migrant status



The context: high rates of exclusion and low attainment at school

At secondary school, black boys, along with white boys from low socio-economic backgrounds, are least likely to perform well at GCSE level (Department for Education, 2016).

From 1997-2014, Black Caribbean students were 3 to 4 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than white students (Gillborn, 2016).

Possible explanations for lower attainment levels of young black men (Khan *et al.*, 2017).

- Low teacher expectations/underestimation of academic ability
- Higher rates of exclusion based on perceived behavioural issues
- Disproportionate placement of pupils in low ability groups early in education
- Schools not meeting boys' cultural needs
- Living in lower socio-economic areas
- Peer group pressures and masculinity issues

The school years are extremely important for young men's future prospects and wellbeing.



Creating an environment which is aware of the cultural and psychological challenges a young black man may face outside of school, and approaching him in a way that counteracts that narrative, is essential to his transformation.

Young people and teachers at our Fix It event shared observations, approaches and strategies to help young black men thrive at school...

Changes to school culture

Pressure on the schools system has led some schools to become conveyer belts for achieving grades. Teachers and students agreed that ideally 'school is a place to clean and cultivate the treasure that is in each child, enabling them to shine in their own way.'

- ✓ Excluding students from school should only be used as a last resort. One youth project lead shared an anecdote about his support of a child who had been excluded from school for having a 'cultural haircut', and the distress this brought him and his family. The exclusion led the child to ask his parent "Mum, why do I have to be black?" The project lead described him as "another young boy now lost in the system".
- ✓ A strengths-based focus is vital when working with young black men. 'Teachers need to create culturally and psychologically informed environments in the classroom in order to break down any resemblance of negativity that young black men may face outside of school...' (Peer researcher, Centre for Mental Health)
- ✓ School staff should consider strategically where the achievement of black pupils sits on their school's development plan, who is a champion for this group, how the school engages the black community, and understand how the school system and 'parenting' children in school is different from how other communities may parent.
- ✓ Each day at school should be seen as a fresh start. Some students become labelled as troublemakers, and start to see themselves as such. It is never too late for a young person to alter their behaviours, and they should not be prejudged by the school community. All members of staff should greet young black men positively.
- ✓ There needs to be better representation of black people in the school's staff team, including the senior leadership team, to display positive role models. This is also important because young people can find it much harder to relate to teachers from a completely different cultural perspective.



"We need more teachers who get to the point – not 'Where's your tie?', but 'Do you need a tie?' – immediately offering help and not embarrassment... if his [a student's] shirt isn't tucked in, he just needs to be taught that's not how he can move on in professional society... through this white-centric world in which he is so undermined and forgotten about and pushed under."

(Young person)



"Instead of saying sorry I'm late, say thank you for waiting for me... As long as you give out a positive persona, people can bounce off of your energy and give you positive feedback. As young black males, we need to break the stigma [and] the stereotypes"

(Young person)

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Relationship building

Some students get most stability in their life from school, where they need to know what is expected of them and that they are cared for.

Whilst some teachers were described as inspirational, young people said they do not always see teachers as real people.

- ✓ Teachers need to consider the underlying reasons for young men's behaviour. For example, a young man in a single parent household may have additional duties and responsibilities (such as cooking, cleaning, contributing financially) and therefore may want to act 'as a kid' at school.
- ✓ Young people who are dealing drugs or engaging in other illegal activities can be spoken to by a trusted adult, to show them that they have good skills which should be redirected towards something positive and legal, such as working for a business
- ✓ Teachers should try to avoid saying anything which could make the young person feel humiliated in front of their peers.
- ✓ Extra support for young black men is important in times of transition – in year 7 and in year 9, where many young people feel unsure about which subjects and/or career route they want to pursue. Supportive conversations led by the young person's own interests are crucial here, to alleviate their anxiety about the future.

'If children perceive their teachers as more human and less robotic, relationship-building between them is easier.'

(Young person)



'As soon as we step out [of our homes] we have eyes on us 24/7, it has a huge effect on mental health ... you constantly feel that you're being watched and judged... you need to be able to come into a space where it's just you and me, we're chilling... that's a huge part of what LightPost is... no one's putting on bravado, everyone is just like 'this is me', and this is why it works so well, we're in a space where we feel comfortable and don't have to become something else to be accepted.'

(Young person)

Outside of school

- ✓ Young black men should be encouraged to get involved with community groups (e.g. youth clubs, sports teams, music groups) which can give them a safe space to 'be' and express themselves.



What is Shifting the Dial?

- Shifting the Dial is a partnership between Centre for Mental Health, First Class Legacy, Birmingham Repertory Theatre (The REP) and Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Trust, and is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.
- We work together to improve young black men's resilience and wellbeing. Part of our work includes bi-annual Fix It events, which aim to achieve systems-change in areas young men deem as important and in need of change.
- Our first Fix It event was about how the needs of young black men could be better met by the education system. It was attended by teachers and young black men in Birmingham in March 2019, and was supported by Birmingham Enterprise Partnership and Titan Partnership.
- The event encouraged teachers and school staff to be more aware of unconscious biases and their own agency to improve the school environment for young black students.

More information about Shifting the Dial

First Class Legacy runs the Dear Youngers mental health and resilience programme, which is a very innovative, therapeutic, solution-based 12 week programme, engaging young African-Caribbean males around wellbeing and mental health resilience and exploring adverse childhood experiences in a safe environment that is psychologically informed, culturally sensitive, and delivered and facilitated by relatable role models. Find out more about the Mental Health Resilience Programme for young males: <https://bit.ly/2KwHtt4>

For more information contact: Info@fclegacy.co.uk or call 07462 236 868.

Lightpost is a company of young black men aged 16-26 from across the region. The company seeks to actively challenge social stigmas and ideas associated with young black men, using theatre as a gateway to create new plays of social and historical importance. So far the company have performed at conferences, theatres and in Westminster to an audience of national decision-makers and commissioners. The group meet weekly at The REP every Tuesday from 6:30pm-9pm and sessions are free.

For more information please email learning@birmingham-rep.co.uk

Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust provides mental health care to those people living in Birmingham & Solihull who are experiencing mental health problems. Based in over 50 sites and in a variety of settings, over 4000 dedicated trust staff are continually working to help people get better and challenge the stigma associated with mental illness.

Centre for Mental Health is a charity with over 30 years' experience in providing life changing research, economic analysis and policy influence in mental health. The Centre provides peer-led research and evaluation to the Shifting the Dial programme, including facilitating the Fix It event and sharing findings from the programme with policymakers and practitioners.

References

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- Morrison Gutman, L. *et al.* (2015) *Children of the New Century: mental health findings from the Millennium Cohort Study*. London: Centre for Mental Health. Available from: www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/children-of-the-new-century

Useful resources

- Dennis, N., 'Message to my Younger ME' Workbook Journal & Audio Book for Young People 13 to 16 years old. Available from: www.tes.com/teaching-resource/workbook-journal-for-audio-book-message-to-my-younger-me-12001588
- Khan, L. (2017) *Fatherhood*. London: Centre for Mental Health. Available from: www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/fatherhood
- Mentally Healthy Schools website: www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk