

RUNNING HEAD: Black Boy Mattering in Schools

**Black adolescent boys' perceived school mattering: From marginalization and selective love to radically affirming relationships**

ABSTRACT

Inspired by Black Lives Matter activism, we used racialized lenses on social-psychological “mattering” to investigate how Black high school boys’ interactions shaped their perceived mattering. Researchers conducted interviews with 17 self-identified Black boys who were part of a larger school-based partnership called The Black Boy Mattering Project. Participants reported *experiencing and resisting interpersonal marginal mattering* (e.g., evidenced in negative interactions with educators and peers and fueled by racist stereotypes) and described *mattering partially through selective love* (e.g., inferring significance through athletics, yet deemed anti-intellectual). Our study exhibits how schools uphold systemic anti-Black racist notions that shape relationships between Black boys and their peers and educators and diminish adolescents’ self-concepts. Implications aim to support educators and researchers in radically affirming Black boys in school contexts.

Keywords: mattering, Black, African American, boys, male, teacher-student relationships

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Adolescence is marked by rapid, and oftentimes confusing, social and cognitive changes. Formulating a positive, robust, and accurate self-concept can buffer youth from the turbulence they encounter during this period (Elliott, 2009). Developing a positive self-concept requires an adolescent to perceive their worth, value, or simply their “mattering.” Feelings of mattering come from meaningful connections to those within their family, schools, and society (Elliott, Cunningham, Colangelo, & Gelles, 2011; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Yet, few encounter more school barriers to developing positive, nuanced self-concepts through mattering than Black adolescent boys (Carey, 2019, 2020). Gendered anti-Black racism, which flourishes through oppressive systems (e.g., disproportional disciplining, school exclusion) and within interpersonal encounters (e.g., racial stereotypes that shape teachers’ low expectations), weakens Black boys’ school attachment and poses relational strain between significant others like peers and teachers (Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). When racism shapes their school experiences, it may compel Black youth to question whether or not they matter at all in school, thus diminishing their academic and global self-concepts.

On July 13, 2013, activists transformed “mattering” into a social justice rallying cry. Black activists used #BlackLivesMatter on social media in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the February 2012 murder of unarmed, 17-year-old Travon Martin. Since then, millions globally have organized under the banner of Black Lives Matter to dismantle systemic racism, call attention to race based extrajudicial killings, and advocate for reimagined social policies, so Black people can infer their mattering across multiple domains (Carey, Polanco, & Blackman, 2021).

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Both social-psychological mattering and the mattering activists offer educational and developmental stakeholders a fruitful starting place to create radically affirming schools and programming for Black adolescents (Carey, 2019, 2020; Carey et al., 2021). Stakeholders must grapple with how racist structures (see Blaisdell, 2016), and anti-Black school practices reinforce that which calls scholar activists, protesters, and social actors to demand reforms that prove Black lives actually matter (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019; Carey, 2019; Garza, 2016; Lebron, 2017; Ransby, 2018; Washington & Henfield, 2019). Yet, for educators to undo oppressive systems and affirm Black boy mattering, we need insights into how they perceive their school mattering and the factors that influence this process. In this article, we use two approaches—interpersonal mattering (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004) and mattering theorized through racialized and gendered lenses (Carey, 2019, 2020)—to unpack the voiced experiences of adolescent Black boys and young men<sup>1</sup>, who participated in our school and university research partnership called The Black Boy Mattering Project. We shed light on how anti-Black racism, which was embedded into the school’s fabric and observed in encounters between Black boys, their educators, and their peers, shaped participants’ perceived mattering.

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<sup>1</sup> To resist the negative social imagery and stereotypes attached to the term “Black male,” for greater precision, and to reclaim the discursive possibility that comes from naming Black childhoods and adulthoods respectively, we deliberately deploy “Black boy” for those under age 18 and “Black young men” for those 18+ in high school (see Carey, 2020; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Wint et al., 2021). Wielded imprecisely, the term Black male infantilizes Black men by lumping adult men into groupings with boys or young teens. It also ‘adultifies’ (Ferguson, 2001) Black boys by rendering them older and more calculating than they are. In this study, participants were mostly late adolescent boys (16–17), but some (see Table 2) were legally young men (18 and over).

## Literature Review

### Interpersonal Mattering

The construct of mattering supposes that an individual can infer that their existence and actions play a meaningful role in the lives of others and in society (Rosenberg, 1979; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Mattering also accounts for feeling significant; it denotes when one is aware of their worth and has the autonomy to positively impact their world (Prilleltensky, 2014). Conversely, not mattering or “anti-mattering” (Flett, 2018b) spurs feelings of marginalization, subordination, or insignificance within an institution, a community, or in a broader society (Scarpa, Zopluoglu, & Prilleltensky, 2021; Schlossberg, 1989).

While mattering can be felt generally, or globally, specific relationships and frequent interactions are central to its development (Flett, 2018b). Elliott et al. (2004) posited that mattering emerges from relationships when we experience “awareness” (i.e., feeling noticed and acknowledged), “importance” (i.e., feeling others invest in us), or “reliance” (i.e., feeling others look to us for support). Interpersonal mattering is pivotal to social and psychological wellbeing because it bolsters an individual’s resilience, increases their engagement, and fosters a positive self-concept (Elliott, 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

### Racial Oppression and Black Boys’ Interpersonal Mattering at School

To understand how Black boys and young men form their self-concepts via perceived interpersonal mattering, it is key to unpack the ways schools institutionalize oppressive systems. Peers and educators alike become unacknowledged agents of oppression by merely privileging students who reflect traits deemed socially desirable and penalizing those whom the society keeps at the margins (Blaisdell, 2016; Carey, Yee, & DeMatthews, 2018). With this, Black boys’ “marginalization” (Schlossberg, 1989) or their perceived “anti-mattering” (Flett, 2018b) comes

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from not just being victimized by one-off interpersonal racist instances. Their perceived marginalization also comes from being from a racial group that has “historically been mistreated or ignored” (Flett, 2018b, p. 224). Such treatment is fueled by stereotypes of Black boys, which are embedded into the fabric of school norms and operate in interpersonal encounters between students and their teachers and peers (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Carey, 2019; Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Rogers & Way, 2016).

When educators and peers engage with Black boys, they may draw from stereotypes of them as brutish, hypersexual, anti-intellectual, and socially unacceptable— notions that carryover from African enslavement (Carey, 2019; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ellis, Rowley, Nellum, & Smith, 2018; Rogers & Way, 2016; Smith & Hope, 2020). These stereotypes inform why stakeholders value Black boys and young men more for their assumed physical or entertainment prowess and less for their intellectual promise (Azzarito & Harrison, 2008; Howard, 2014).

When Black boys internalize racist and gendered stereotypical treatment, it may result in devastating consequences such as distress and depressive symptoms (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2008; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003), diminished school engagement (Buckley, 2018; Griffin, Metzger, Halliday-Boykins, & Salazar, 2020; Smalls et al., 2007), and a decreased likelihood to persist in school (Bell & Puckett, 2020; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003).

Vitality, racial stereotypes are not standalone in their impact; they intersect with gender, class, and sexuality to frame Black adolescent boys’ working models of their identities (Carey, Yee, et al., 2018; Way, Hernandez, Rogers, & Hughes, 2013). As such, they negotiate presenting identities by weighing the consequences of behaving in ways deemed problematically “Black” and “hypermasculine” (Buckley, 2018; Harris, Kruger, & Scott, 2020; Houston, Pearman, &























































































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**Table 1.**

*County High School Demographics and Academic Outcomes*

<b>County High School Characteristics</b>		
<b>Membership</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Count	1,059	64 (FTE*)
<b>Racial Composition</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Black	37.96%	12.90%
White	32.49%	80.65%
Hispanic	21.62%	4.84%
Asian	4.34%	0.00%
Two or More Races	3.21%	1.61%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0.38%	0.00%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0.00%	0.00%
<b>Gender Composition</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Female	51.09%	41.94%
Male	48.91%	58.06%
<b>Academic Outcomes</b>	<b>County H.S.</b>	<b>State</b>
Four-year Graduation Rate	73.52%	87.70%
College and Career Ready	37.50%	58.59%

\*FTE=Full Time Equivalent

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**Table 2.** *Participant's Personal Characteristics*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Self-Described Personal Qualities</b>
Abraham	17	Black	African American	Smart, Nice, Funny, Talkative, and Talented
Charles	18	Black	African American	Laidback and Funny
Darien	16	Black	Second generation, Ghanaian	Quiet, Positive, Funny, Outgoing, and Kind
De'Andre	17	Black	African American	Funny and Calm
Dee	18	Black	African American	Calm, Smart, Outgoing, Kind, Fun, and Caring
Denzel	17	Black	African American	Funny, Smart, Hardworking, and Happy
Deuce	17	Black	African American	Calm and Independent
Henny	15	Black	Second generation, Liberian and Ghanaian	Funny, Positive, Athletic, Loud, and Energetic
John	16	Black	African American	Friendly, Gentle, Caring, and Athletic
Josh	18	Black	African American	Calm and Funny
Lewis	17	Black	African American	Funny and Talkative
Mac	18	Black	African American	Quiet, Funny, and Nice
Michael	15	Black	Second generation, Nigerian	Talkative, Hardworking, and Smart
Sa(man)tha	17	Black	African American	Compassionate and Generous
Sean	17	Black	African American	Happy, Enthusiastic, Funny, Athletic, and Smart
Steven	15	Black (Biracial)	African American and White	Smart, Shy, Funny, Caring, and Calm
Tei	17	Black	African American	Funny, Smart, Athletic, and Unique



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**Table 3.**

*Participants' Academics and Affiliations*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>Class/Year</b>	<b>Favorite Teachers</b>	<b>Academic Affiliations (e.g., Clubs and Teams)</b>
Abraham	3.4	Senior	Math teacher and English teacher	Basketball and Track
Charles	N/A	Senior	Math teacher	Basketball and Sports club
Darien	3	Junior	African American studies teacher and Gym teacher	Soccer
De'Andre	2.8	Junior	African American Studies teacher and Economics teacher	Basketball
Dee	2.4	Senior	African American studies teacher and Math teacher	Football, Basketball, and Baseball
Denzel	N/A	Junior	African American studies teacher	Football
Deuce	3	Senior	English teacher and AVID teacher	Basketball and Football
Henny	3.6	Sophomore	Gym teacher, Art teacher, and Biology teacher	Basketball
John	3	Junior	Chemistry teacher, Spanish teacher, Math teacher, and AVID teacher	Football, Wrestling, and Volunteer for school events (e.g., pep rallies and prom)
Josh	1.8	Senior	AVID teacher	Football
Lewis	2.6	Junior	AVID teacher and Telecommunications teacher	Football and Basketball
Mac	1.8	Senior	Linemen coach and Math teacher	Football
Michael	3.8	Sophomore	Math teacher	Track
Sa(man)tha	2.4	Junior	English teacher	Track, Academy of Creative Expression (ACE) program, and Wise Guys program
Sean	3.1	Junior	Chemistry teacher and Math teacher	Basketball
Steven	3.7	Sophomore	English teacher	None
Tei	2.2	Junior	English teacher	Basketball

Note: Fall GPAs were self-reported and an "N/A" reflects either students who either did not know their GPA or did not wish to share it with the interviewer.