



Black Brilliance Discussion Guide

The [Black Brilliance](#) full documentary, along with other related [media tools](#) can be found on TPT'S YouTube playlist titled *American Graduate: Believe in Black Youth*.

FOREWORD

Black Brilliance is a documentary created by Twin Cities PBS, as part of the American Graduate campaign, celebrating the brilliance of five black Minnesota high school students. It was developed in response to systemic racism in general and especially in Minnesota. Statistics show that Minnesota has some of the largest racial disparities in wealth, representation, education, and presence in the criminal justice system in the country. Documenting *Black Brilliance* is a counter-narrative to the idea that black students are not "achieving". Black young people *are* achieving and doing so in amazing ways—they are not only defining success for themselves, they are achieving that success.

PURPOSE

This discussion guide is designed for a broad viewing audience with the intention to assist in thinking more deeply about the issues and developing a personalized awareness of 'brilliance' by:

- Identifying challenges and supports that students in *Black Brilliance experience*, and connecting these to participants' brilliance
- Unpacking 'brilliance' into components such as 'support' and 'expectations', and discussing how those components play out in the young people's experiences
- Initiating dialogues regarding the narratives. Identifying who defines and perpetuates these narratives and recognizing the personal power of black students and all young people to create their own narratives of brilliance

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The suggestion to develop this guide emerged at a meeting of the GradMinnesota Advisory Council held at TPT - Twin Cities PBS after a screening of *Black Brilliance*. It was collaboratively developed over a series of months by Minnesota Alliance With Youth staff, AmeriCorps Promise Fellows, and a focus group of youth workers who self-identify as black. Alliance staff initially gathered and compiled a set of questions that had been used with several other viewings of the documentary. The focus group provided feedback and input on the questions and the structure of the guide. The process was driven by a shared mission of wanting young black people to know for themselves that they are brilliant, that others see black youth as brilliant, and to recognize individuals' roles in either perpetuating or mitigating narratives and expectations that impact a young people's perceptions of worth.



HOW SHOULD THIS GUIDE BE USED?

All, or portions, of this guide may be used or adapted to the needs of your group to promote discussion of the film. The intended age group for this discussion guide is 12 and older. Depending on the audience, **it may be necessary to have one or more discussions about race and racism before watching the documentary.** Talking about race is an extremely fruitful process that can and should happen at all ages. However, sometimes all of the group members may not feel comfortable engaging in the discussion. Listed below are some strategies that may be helpful in creating an inclusive and positive experience for all discussion participants.

- ⇒ Establish norms. As a group, generate supportive and culturally competent expectations for behavior during the discussion. This is an important step and may take time and intentional conversation to collectively define what a “safe place” is. *Tip: Developing spaces and cultures that make critical race conversations possible and rewarding requires more than declaring a space “safe”.*
- ⇒ Discuss the current context. As a group, discuss disparities that exist in society today as a way to contextualize *Black Brilliance*. This can be a tremendous learning experience in itself, and it may also make the post-viewing discussion more powerful and productive. *For example, before watching the documentary discuss questions such as, “What is the achievement gap?” “What does educational equity mean to you?” “Are only black and brown students experiencing the achievement gap?” “How have you been part of the achievement gap?”*
- ⇒ Discuss the historical context. *Provide context through numbers that demonstrate historical disparities and how they have influenced the disparities that exist today.*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Introduction

Black Brilliance tells the story of five black high school seniors from Minnesota. In this 30-minute documentary, we follow these students on their journey to graduation: what it takes, what it means, and how to define success on one’s own terms. The goal is to build a positive narrative around African American youth by sharing their stories and voices.

Questions

a. Simple recall questions

- What stood out to you the most about this film, and why?
- What did the young people in the film cite as motivation to work towards their goals?
- What did the students in the film mention as obstacles/barriers on their paths to success?

b. Open-ended discussion questions

- How did the students featured in the film define success? How do schools define success? How does society define success?
- Do any of the stories in this film remind you of people in your life?
- Eshay said “I know the system is not built for minority kids.” What do you think of her comment? Describe an example or an experience that reflects this. Name one thing that *you* can do to change this.
- Michael mentioned his mother’s expectation that he go to college, “It’s like law,” he said with a smile. What expectations do others have of you and how do those play out in your life?

c. Self-Reflection questions

- Based on the film, what does black brilliance look like? How would you define black brilliance?
- What can *you* do to promote black brilliance in your school and community? What can *you* do to spread awareness about black brilliance?
- What supports do you see that are already in place in your school/community? Where could there be more improvements?
- What assumptions does this documentary make? What are the implications of those assumptions?

d. Ask students to synthesize outside resources and create a new product that is reflective of their unique brilliance; a poem, story, spoken word, letter, video, dance, or a piece of art.

Examples:

- Share your black brilliance stories or stories of someone you know
- Video production projects: make short videos such as “I am...”/”Meet...” (Example: [Meet Michael](#))
- Have an open-mic night for spoken word performances
- Hold an art festival for students to display and share their artwork and performances
- Display and showcase students’ work in your community

RESOURCES

For more information or services, visit the following:



[Black Brilliance on TPT \(amgradmn.tpt.org/home\)](http://amgradmn.tpt.org/home)

Learn more about the Believe in Black Youth project and the stories of the spotlighted youth!

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER



President Obama launched the [My Brother's Keeper](http://whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper) initiative (whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper) to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential. Through this initiative, the Administration is joining with cities and towns, businesses, and foundations who are taking important steps to connect young people to mentoring, support networks, and the skills they need to find a good job or go to college and work their way into the middle class.



[American Graduate: Let's Make It Happen \(americangraduate.org\)](http://americangraduate.org) is a multi-year public media initiative made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to help communities identify and implement solutions to the high school dropout crisis. This local and national initiative uses the power of public media to shed light on the barriers to success our young people face, and partner with communities to break those barriers down.



[Minnesota Alliance With Youth \(mnyouth.net\)](http://mnyouth.net) is a leading convener, collaborator, and capacity-builder for youth development in Minnesota. We work with and for youth to ensure that all young people have access to fundamental resources proven to ensure that youth succeed – the “Five Promises” – caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to help others.



The [Office Of Black Male Student Achievement](#), part of Minneapolis Public Schools, is dedicated to accelerating academic strategies and narrowing the achievement gap. Reversing the achievement gap will not happen overnight, nor can we do it alone. We are acting with urgency to address the achievement gap head-on in our schools.

Endnote. This guide and the *Black Brilliance* documentary is, of course, not a stand-in for other communities of color in Minnesota and the Twin Cities. Throughout the development of this guide, reviewers and focus group members kept returning to the need for a documentary about the brilliance of other populations of young people such as Hmong, Somali, Karen, Latino, etc. If you would like to see another *Brilliance* documentary, please send your comments to partner@tpt.org. If you have written or verbal feedback about the discussion guide, please send your comments or contact information to info@mnyouth.net.