



American Promise Discussion Guide

Directors: Joe Brewster, Michele Stephenson
Year: 2013
Time: 135 min

You might know these directors from:

Slaying Goliath (2008)
The Killing Zone (2003)
Coming Home: The Dry Storm (2010)
Slaying Goliath (2008)

FILM SUMMARY

Joe Brewster and Michele Stephenson began filming their 5-year-old son, Idris, and his friend Seun in order to capture the experience of black boys in modern-day America. Beginning in 1999 and continuing over a 12-year period, AMERICAN PROMISE documents the boys' experiences at Dalton School in Manhattan, a private institution with a primarily white student body and administrative staff. The film strives to answer the questions: how will these boys fare in a white-dominated world? Will they be presented with the same care and opportunities as their classmates? What will become of these black boys as they navigate the treacherous landscape to manhood within a white world?

As the film unfolds, the educational achievement gap that affects children across the U.S. becomes visible. Idris, Seun, and their families confront stereotypes they'd hoped America had overcome. As prejudices simmer below the surface of their lives, their identities are put to the test. Slapped with the minority sticker at Dalton, ostracized amongst the black community for sounding 'white,' under enormous pressure to rise up to their parents' hopes, Idris and Seun pull through despite the myriad of odds stacked against them.

Crafted by two well-meaning parents, AMERICAN PROMISE analyzes the extent and strength of the obstacles stacked against these boys. At times, the pressure they feel suffocates and divides the two friends. Was this pressure in the original script? Regardless, it is very real, not only for Idris and Seun, but for many black children across the post-slavery nation of America.

FILM THEMES

The pressure is consistent, while the opportunities are not. Seun and Idris are indoctrinated to succeed, despite the endless odds, both internally and externally. Their parents settle for nothing less than perfection, but U.S. private schools fall short of equal opportunity. The boys must traverse the emotional terrain of their upbringings on their own.

PRESSURES OF PRIVATE EDUCATION

Private schooling promises a top-notch education, attention to individual needs, and access to many of life's opportunities not accessible with public education. However, these benefits often come with a cost: excessive pressure on children. Parents sacrifice great amounts of money in the quest for private education, and somewhere in their subconscious, they demand to witness a return on this investment in the form of top grades, Ivy League college acceptance, etc. This leads to neurotic self-defense behaviors (such as procrastination) later in life, as children develop an unusually strong association between their performance and their value as a person, making it difficult to act.

NOT BLACK OR WHITE

Not only did Idris and Seun face the challenges that came with their minority status at Dalton, they also faced prejudice from members of the black community. After Idris' black peers criticized him for sounding like a white boy, he changed his accent, only to then be interrogated by his parents. Straddling the racial fence, neither white with whites nor truly black with blacks, who could these boys identify with, and which social cues were they to take while forming their own individual identity?

PARENTS VS. CHILDREN

"I wish he had half the drive I had when I was that age," claimed Idris' mother, a feeling echoed by Seun's mother as she reflected on the hardships of her upbringing. Living in the shadow of their parents' pasts and their parents' bearing tantamount hopes, Idris and Seun deal with pressures and struggles that their parents never had to, and therefore cannot understand. The assumption that these boys are fully equipped to take on the world - if only racism disappeared from the education system - is a farsighted assumption that causes adults to fail their children in a variety of nuanced ways.

SLAVERY IS A DISTANT MEMORY?

Idris' paternal grandfather could not read until the age of 40 and was called "Nigger Joe" at his workplace, something Idris is reminded of in order to place his situation in perspective. And yet the land of opportunity, in its current post-slavery phase, offers anything but equal opportunities for black American children. When slavery is taught in the classroom, Idris and Seun are stared down. They're also subversively assigned to the minority side of the cafeteria. Thus, arguably, the boys confront prejudices that are more subtly pronounced but just as great as those faced by their grandparents' generation.

"I want Seun to be comfortable around white folks. Even now I am not comfortable around white folks."

Stacey Summers

"I am hard on you because I want you to be a better man than I am."

Joe Brewster

"I bet if I was white, I'd be better off."

Idris Brewster

FILM FACTS:

- AMERICAN PROMISE won two awards, including Special Jury Prize at Sundance and Best Doc at Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. It was nominated for an additional two awards, including the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance.
- Joe Brewster, AMERICAN PROMISE co-director and father of Idris, grew up in Los Angeles and went on to study at Stanford and Harvard Universities. He currently works as a psychiatrist and filmmaker. Along with his wife, Michele Stephenson, he founded RADA Film Group in order to tell stories about communities that have been neglected by the mainstream media.
- Michele Stephenson, co-director of AMERICAN PROMISE and mother of Idris, was born in Haiti. Formerly a human rights attorney, she devotes her time to filmmaking and new media projects.
- Black Americans represent 16% of the K-12 school population. 48% of black American males do not complete high school, compared to 22% of white males. 1 in every 4 black American male dropouts is incarcerated or in detention. Every dropout costs society an estimated \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity.
- On average, black American 12th graders read at the same level as white American 8th graders. The 12th grade reading scores of black American males were significantly lower than those for men and women across every other racial and ethnic group.
- Black American students are suspended and expelled from school at a rate 3 times greater than their white American counterparts. More than 1 out of 4 black American male students with a disability receives a suspension.
- In February 2014, U.S. President Obama launched “My Brother’s Keeper,” an initiative aimed at helping young men and boys of color reach their full potential despite the odds. At least \$200 million in donations over the next 5 years, along with an initial investment of \$150 million, will fund this project to boost black men.
- With U.S. students underperforming in international tests, 64% of American adults believe that parents are placing too little pressure on students to succeed. In Britain, only 35% of adults feel students receive too little pressure, while in China, 11% feel that students should be pushed to achieve more.
- Only 2% of the 4.8 million American teachers are black males. It was previously believed that college-educated black males pursued more lucrative careers, but new research shows that this low percentage is due to the fact that only 16% of black males receive a degree and only a small number pursue a degree in education.
- Like Idris, 11% of American children have been diagnosed with ADHD. Boys are twice as likely to be diagnosed as girls. 6% of those diagnosed take medication.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Visit PBS’ POV to download the AMERICAN PROMISE discussion guide and incite even more meaningful discussion with your family and friends.
2. If you are a parent, join or start a Promise Club – a parental support club – to find out more visit www.americanpromise.com/#!/promise-club
3. Read “Promises Kept: Raising Black Boys to Succeed in School and in Life,” a book published as a companion to the film.
4. Support the 2025 Network for Black Men and Boys aimed at improving black males’ chances for success.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.