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Boyz to men? Teaching to restore Black boys' childhood

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Many schools see teaching African American boys as a daunting challenge. However, in many schools the primary focus of Black male children's educational experience is maintaining order and discipline rather than student learning and academic achievement. By the time Black boys reach the 3rd or 4th grade their teachers and other school personnel no longer treat them like children, but rather like men. This paper will describe the current state of education for Black male students and propose ways to ensure that we teach all children, particularly Black boys in intellectually, socially, and culturally appropriate ways.

Keywords: Black; male; education

I begin this discussion with a disclaimer – I am a mother of African American sons. Granted they are now adults, but their experiences as children, adolescents, and young adults have had a profound impact on how I read the scholarly literature and make sense of education policy and practices regarding Black¹ boys. No discussion of African American males is complete without the litany of statistical woes that beset them. And, while I will reference those numbers, my aim is to move beyond a mere delineation of the problems to looking at how African American male students' schooling actually functions to exacerbate their problems and to discuss how we might become agents of change that help to alleviate the problems.

First, it is important to start with the things we already know and have heard repeatedly about the situation of Black men in the United States – and that situation does show some improvement. In 2000 a mere quarter of the 1.9 million Black men between 18 and 24 attended college (33.8%). In contrast, 35% of Black women in that same age group and 36% of all 18–24 year olds were attending college. Between 2003 and 2005 college participation among African American males increased from 37.8% to 38% (American Council of Education 2007).

The American Council of Education (2007) further reports that the graduation rate of Black males is the lowest of any population. Only 35% of the Black men who enrolled in NCAA Division I schools graduated within six years. White men graduated at a rate of 59%; Latino men, 46%; American Indian men, 41%; and Black women, 45%. But it is not merely college graduation rates that foreshadow a poor outcome for African American males. Their life chances are markedly different than that of other groups.

Ronald Mincy, editor of *Black Males Left Behind* (2006), reported 'There's something very different happening with young Black men and it's something we can no longer ignore. Over the last two decades, the economy did great and low-skilled

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women, helped by public policy latched onto it. But Black men were falling farther back.’ (Eckholm 2006)

In 2005, 65% of Black male high school dropouts in their 20s were jobless – that is, unable to find work, not seeking it, or incarcerated. By 2004, the share of jobless in this category had grown to 72% compared with 34% of White and 19% of Latino dropouts. Even when high school graduates were included, half of Black men in their 20s were jobless in 2004, up from 46% in 2000.

In the current economic recession Black male unemployment rates for those 20-years-old or older has risen from 15.4% to 17.2% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). For young Black males, aged 16–19 the unemployment rate is 49.4% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). These numbers rival depression era figures.

Incarceration rates climbed in the 1990s and have reached historic highs in recent years. In 1995, 16% of Black men in their 20s who did not attend college were in jail; by 2004, 21% were incarcerated. By their mid-30s, six out of ten Black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison. In the inner city, more than half of all Black men do not finish high school.

A 2004 study by the Schott Foundation found that although Black males make up only 8.6% of public school enrollment, they represent 22% of expulsions and 23% of suspensions. Polite and Davis (1999) found that for the same offense, suspension days ranged from two to 22 days – intimating that school personnel use a fair amount of discretion in determining how to sanction students. Of Black boys who enter special education, only 10% return to regular classrooms permanently and only 27% ever graduate. In addition to the numbers, research has found that Black boys often do not feel cared for in their school communities (Rawls 2006). Yet, the single most important thing in turning lives around according to Noddings (1992) ‘is the ongoing presence of a caring adult’ (cited in Varlas 2005, 1).

Just listing the social facts concerning Black male students is depressing and distressing. Our tendency is to do one of two things – either wring our hands in despair or point our fingers in blame. Unfortunately, sometimes we do both (at the same time) but rarely do we take a more measured and systematic approach to parsing out the part of the students’ problems that we as educators have some control over. For the sake of this discussion I want to frame our (i.e. adults associated with schooling) responses into a few sets of behaviors and thoughts that govern what we do with African American male students that, for the most part, we do not do with other groups of students. These behaviors have to do with thoughts and behaviors that describe tensions between love versus hate, fear and control, and infantilization versus criminalization.

The love–hate relationship with Black males

Perhaps more than any other group in our society, America (indeed the world) has a love–hate relationship with Black males. The ‘love’ aspect of the relationship is exhibited in the way mainstream Americans embrace a variety of cultural forms that are either designed or dominated by Black males. In his provocative film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989), director Spike Lee confronts the White racist son of the neighborhood pizza store owner with the fact that although he despises Black people, his favorite recording artist is Michael Jackson and his favorite athlete is Michael Jordan. The son, Pino, struggles to explain the paradox and finally mutters something about Jackson and Jordan not actually being ‘Black.’ Somehow their super star qualities have

allowed them to transcend the pedestrian notions of everyday Black men. Lee's inclusion of that scene may have been designed to help America see its own confusion and ambivalence about Black people, Black males in particular.

No cultural form is more marketable than Black male youth culture (Price 2006). The clothes, the style, the language, and the effects of young, Black, urban males are visible throughout the nation and the world. It has left an indelible mark on Madison Avenue, Hollywood, and most forms of media. Everywhere I have traveled recently, Australia, Japan, the Caribbean, London, Paris, Ghana, and even Sweden have presented examples of this culture to me. The young people wear baggy pants, professional sports team jerseys, baseball caps, expensive sneakers and have tattoos. The international youth heroes are music makers like P. Diddy, 50 Cent, Jay-Z, L'il Wayne and athletes like LeBron James, Allen Iverson, and Shaquille O'Neal.

The symbolic message attached to these young Black men is that they are seductive and intriguing. Perhaps what one must begin to unravel is the construction of Black men as both dangerous (taboo, forbidden) and sensual. Clearly we have no shortage of images of Black men as simultaneously appealing and repulsive.

When we look at the 'hate' aspect of this dichotomy, we see African American males as 'problems' that our society must find ways to eradicate. We regularly determine them to be the root cause of most problems in schools and society. We seem to hate their dress², their language, and their effect. We hate that they challenge authority and command so much social power. We seem convinced that if they wouldn't act so... 'Black,' they would not be problems. While the society apparently loves them in narrow niches and specific slots – music, basketball, football, track – we seem less comfortable with them than in places like the National Honor Society, the debate team, or the computer club. When Black men do show up in these places we consider them oddities and exceptions. Like the character Pino in Spike Lee's film, these 'exceptions' are often not considered truly Black. An interesting take on this notion is the response to Barak Obama early in the US Presidential race as not being 'Black enough.' However, when the one exception does end up in those unexpected spaces the society is quick to announce his or her exceptionality to everyone, especially their peers, to further re-inscribe the notion that these individuals are 'special.' Their specialness can serve to alienate them from other Black people and place them in what might be described as psychological danger. This lifting up of one individual ignores the fact that all students need peers and being placed in an exceptional category leaves one without support or social moorings. We set that individual up for failure at some level in some aspect of his life. This treatment is especially detrimental to the social and emotional development of Black male students (Spencer 2008).

Fear and control

The love-hate relationship that we have with Black males is buffered by two equally strong sentiments – fear and the need for control. For example, I cannot think of very many young Black men who have not had the experience of having some woman – of any race – cross the street to avoid contact with them. This behavior coupled with things like women clutching their purses, people stepping out of elevators when Black males step in, or having taxi drivers routinely pass Black male passengers on the street are a part of daily experiences of Black men in this society (Shields 1999). Perhaps if these incidents occurred on a more random basis we could attribute them to male-female inequality. But when they happen almost exclusively to Black men – any Black

man (regardless of class, education status, and age) – we know that there exists a widespread fear of them throughout the society. My experience with these kinds of incidents comes first hand as a mother of adult sons. Despite working hard to raise smart, courteous, kind, law-abiding citizens, I am faced with the reality of the many times the incidents described previously have happened to them. While my sons laugh the incidents off as ignorance on the part of the other people and share stories of Black male comedians who joke about similar experiences, I will confess that it makes me angry. My sons have done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment but the society has projected its wholesale fear on them.

In schools the response to this fear is manifested in exhibiting increasing levels of control. We feel compelled to control Black male bodies at all times (Enteman and Rojecki 2001). About a year ago I went into four schools in a city of about 700,000. The first school had mostly White students and I was amazed at how freely students were permitted to walk the halls and move about the classroom. It was only in the places where safety was an issue, where the children's bodies were tightly controlled (e.g. there was a portion of the play yard where cars were permitted to drive to drop off students). However, when I made my way to schools serving large numbers of Black students (and in one case the entire student population was Black) I could not help but notice the degree to which every aspect of the students' activities were regulated – not just what they were taught, but also how their bodies were controlled. They were required to wear uniforms; they had to line up in particular ways, they were prohibited from talking in social spaces like hallways and the cafeteria. There is only one analogy to this kind of regulation – prison.

A few years ago I witnessed another other example of this tight regulation. An elementary principal proudly took me to see her 'restitution room.' In it were several rows of children, all Black and all male, sitting absolutely silent with their hands folded. The classroom was presided over by an instructional aid and there were no books or reading materials in the room. There were no displays on the bulletin boards, no cute and colorful pictures of school children or animals, no admonitions about how to be a good student. It was just a bare room with four walls. The principal turned to me and asked what I thought. My response was probably impolite but I replied, 'I think it's fine if you're training them for prison.'

Infantilization versus criminalization

The paradox of Black boys' experiences in school and society is that mainstream perceptions of them vacillate between making them babies and making them men. When they are somewhere between the ages of three and six years they are acknowledged as cute but rarely as intellectually capable. They rarely are held to high academic standards or expected to be academic leaders in the classroom (Kunjufu 2005). Some may focus on their cuteness but not on their cognition. We may think they are sweet but rarely particularly smart.

This notion of little Black boys as cute does not last long. Before long they are moved to a category that resembles criminals. Their childhood evaporates before they are eight or nine-years-old when teachers and other school officials begin to think of them as 'men.' The fear and control previously referenced appears to be activated and the once 'cute' boys become problematic 'men.'

I recall sitting in a classroom of 3rd graders observing a student teacher. The classroom was filled with a diverse group of students – Latinos, Asian Americans, African

Americans, and White students. One little boy, an Asian American student I will call 'Stanley' kept getting up out of his seat. Repeatedly, the student teacher said things such as, 'sit down Stanley,' 'go back to your seat Stanley,' and 'not now Stanley,' while she was attempting to work with another group of students in a reading group. I documented nine times that she spoke to Stanley about getting out of his seat. Some time later a Black boy I will call, 'Larry' got up out of his seat to ask the student teacher a question and immediately she snapped, 'what are you doing out of your seat? You're out of here!' In a few minutes he was on his way to the principal's office.

During our post-observation conference I pointed out the disparity between her responses to the two boys. I showed her each time I had documented her repeated warnings to Stanley and her one sanction issued to Larry. When she looked at my log she was shocked at what she had done and at a loss for words to explain why she had treated the two boys so differently. Hers was a classic example of how her fear of losing control (after all her supervisor was observing her and she wanted everything to go smoothly) fostered criminalization.

In another instance a colleague was doing professional development work with a middle school that historically served a White, upper middle-class community. More recently the school began to receive a number of low- to moderate-income families within its boundaries and the teachers, administrators, and White parents began to complain about how badly behaved the Black students were. My colleague made an unannounced visit to the school a few days before the scheduled professional development session. On the day of the professional development session my colleague began by saying, 'You have some serious problems in this school.' The staff members began nodding their heads in agreement. 'You have some students here who think they do not have to follow the rules,' she continued. And once again the heads nodded. 'You have some students who have no regard for authority.' Heads continued to nod and a few muttered, 'yes.' Finally, the professional developer said, 'And they are the White, male students!' At that moment a look of shock and disbelief came over the faces. Nowhere in the staff's minds were White boys seen as the problem even though the professional developer had spent a day watching White boys mouthing off to teachers and other adults, disrupting classes with smart aleck comments, and generally having their way in the school. The professional developer had also seen the notorious 'big, bad Black boy' the staff had talked about – all 98 pounds of him. The incongruity between what the teachers described as the problem and what the outside observer witnessed underscores the way that Black boys can go from students to criminals in the minds of the their teachers and other adults.

The instances I have described are bad enough as isolated events. However, they are more often than not a pattern of behaviors and responses that Black boys regularly face in school. Two cases in the US, The Jena 6 and that of Genarlow Wilson underscore the widely different treatment that Black boys can expect from both schools and the justice system. In Jena, Louisiana, the African American boys who assaulted a White student were treated criminally while the White boys who initially maintained a 'White' tree and then hung a noose there when the principal indicated that Black students were permitted to sit under it were given short school suspensions. In Georgia, Genarlow Wilson, a 17-year-old high school student who maintained a 3.2 GPA and was looking forward to a promising college career was arrested and charged with sexual assault for a consensual sexual encounter with a teenage girl.

Wilson was convicted and sentenced to 11 years – ten years mandatory jail time and one year of probation. Wilson also would have to register as a sex offender. As

his case wound its way through the justice system Wilson ended up spending almost three years in prison. He was released in late October 2007 at the age of 21. For those of us who are parents of teenagers the thought of them having sex may seem criminal but clearly we do not think they deserve to go to jail because of it. Wilson engaged in behavior that countless teenagers do every day. Why did the young Black man, with no criminal record, end up in prison?

Schools as the source of the problem

Perhaps we could rest easier if the site of Black boys' problems were their homes with their parents and siblings, or the streets with the police and law enforcement. But one of the primary places where Black boys' problems appear is in school. From the moment Black boys enter school who and how they can be is predetermined. When my daughter began kindergarten I noticed that there was one Black boy in her classroom. Within a few weeks I began to hear my daughter say, 'Christopher is a bad boy.' Knowing that Christopher was the only Black boy in the class I asked my daughter to explain what she meant by her statement. She responded, 'Oh, he's always in trouble. He's a bad boy!' When I began to serve as a parent volunteer in the classroom I noticed that Christopher was one of the brightest students in the class. Regularly he completed assigned tasks before anyone else in the classroom. He quickly grew bored and began to wander around the room. He would look at other children's work and remark, 'Are you still working on that, you must be stupid!' That kind of remark immediately got him a reprimand and before long he was being referred to the principal's office. Of course, five-year-old Christopher was speaking in an inappropriate way and the teacher needed to deal with that. But he needed to receive a reprimand that allowed him to stay in the classroom. He also needed the teacher to acknowledge his superior intellect, encourage him as a student, and design appropriate instructional activities so that he would have less time to get bored and begin pestering other students. Instead what Christopher was beginning to learn from his kindergarten experience was how to be a 'bad boy.'

Years later I went into a high school where I happened upon a middle-aged White male teacher who was in a serious argument with a White male student. The two were shouting at each other when the student let out a major profanity calling the teacher a 'M-F' (the student actually said the obscenity). The shocked teacher looked at the student and said to him, 'Why are you talking like that, you're not Black?' I looked with amazement at the other adult present, the custodian who was a Black man. He just shook his head and walked away. This was a jarring instance that reminded me that there is a perception of who Black male students are that persists even when there are no Black males present. The teacher did not tell the student that he had no right to speak to him using a profanity. He also did not attribute the student's bad behavior to him. Instead, he attributed such behavior to the influence of some imagined Black student who apparently is crude, obscene, and disrespectful.

Martin Haberman (1991) points out that students in urban classrooms regularly strike a deal with their teachers. This deal is particularly apparent among Black male students and involves teachers and students negotiating the following deal: 'You don't require any work from me and I won't disrupt your class.' We see that this particular deal has been struck every time we walk into classrooms and see Black male students sitting in the back with their heads down on their desks. They do not do any work or contribute to the intellectual activity of the classroom but they are keeping their end

of the bargain. The teachers appreciate their 'integrity' and keep their end of the bargain by failing to include them in the learning environment or demanding any academic work from them.

The ability to strike such a deal with students is emblematic of the incredibly low standards schools set for Black boys. They are regularly expected to participate in what Haberman (1991) calls the 'pedagogy of poverty.' Haberman identified 14 specific acts that traditionally constitute the core functions of urban teaching: giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, assigning homework, reviewing homework, settling disputes, punishing non-compliance, marking papers, and giving grades.

There are times when any one of these activities might have a beneficial effect, but, Haberman writes, 'taken together and performed to the systematic exclusion of other acts, they do not work.' This pedagogy of poverty is 'sufficiently powerful to undermine the implementation of any reform effort because it defines the way pupils spend their time, the nature of the behaviors they practice, and the basis of their self-concept as learners. Essentially, it is a pedagogy in which learners can "succeed" without becoming either involved or thoughtful.'

Further, Haberman (1991) asserts that the pedagogy of poverty appeals to those who did not do well in schools themselves. It appeals to those who rely on common sense rather than thoughtful analysis. It appeals to those who fear poor children and children of color and as a result they often are obsessed with control. It appeals to those who are unaware of the full range of pedagogical options.

Schools also contribute to the problem by 'creating' infractions that will apply primarily to Black boys (Majors and Bilson 1992). So, Black boys find themselves excluded from academic opportunities because of arbitrary and capricious school rules (e.g. hat wearing inside a building, wearing baggy pants, giving an adult a disapproving or surly look). The magnification of these kinds of minor infractions is especially targeted toward Black boys as a method of control.

Another way that schools contribute to the problems that Black boys experience has to do with what some scholars identify as the 'feminization of learning' (Gurian and Stevens 2004). This concept refers to the way that schooling, its personnel, and its activities are linked to more stereotypical feminine spheres. Many boys are deeply influenced by the messages the society send about what a 'real man' is and as a consequence they reject schooling. This is true, not only of Black boys, but increasingly of all boys. However, schools have been slow to respond to this perception of themselves as overly feminine. Clearly, the teaching population reinforces this notion and the kinds of learning activities schools encourage rarely tap into boys' interests.

Few early childhood classrooms have workbenches with tools. Few middle grade classrooms give students an opportunity to build models or learn to play drums. Seemingly, it is only in the vocational tracks of our high schools that students have the opportunity to learn about automobiles – one of the most significant inventions of modern life. Interestingly, in a West Philadelphia high school known for its failing academic profile, a teacher organized a group of mostly Black boys to prepare them to compete in the 'Tour d' Sol' a contest for building solar powered automobiles (<http://www.progressiveautoxprize.org/teams/west-philly-hybrid-x-team>, accessed February 13, 2010). To most people's surprise the team beat all of their suburban competitors – both high school and college level. Once they won the competition, the students and their teacher put together a template for replicating success in subsequent

years and they won the contest again. By the third year, when the school was attracting lots of attention for its achievement in the auto building contest the administrators began talking about shutting it down because it was ‘draining too many resources.’ Fortunately, some private monies were found to keep the project going. Because activities like this are missing from the typical school curriculum we find ourselves regularly trying to maintain peace and order in the school rather than trying to develop and challenge minds.

While it is important to avoid gender stereotyping in the development of school curriculum we do have a responsibility to use available data to learn more about the interests and course taking patterns of boys in our schools. In programs like Brooklyn’s El Puente we see that boys regularly choose aspects of its hip hop curriculum that focus on DJ’ing, graffiti art, spoken word, and dancing, and girls are more likely to focus on dance, spoken word and clothing design. While there is some overlap, there are clear gender distinctions in student interest and smart teachers will capitalize on those differences to support student learning.

Eastside Preparatory Academy in East Palo Alto, California, has decided to create a focused mission in which students are challenged to do exceptionally high quality work (similar to that of elite prep schools) and the faculty, staff, and administrators surround the students with plenty of support to help students achieve. In its ten-year existence Eastside, which serves a 100% low income and minority community, has posted a 100 high school graduation rate and a 100% four-year college-going rate. The students take four years of English, college preparatory mathematics, science, social studies, and participate in the arts and service learning.

The boys in the settings listed above are treated like students and they respond favorably to that treatment. They are encouraged to, as the late Ted Sizer says, ‘use their minds well’ and see school as a place where they can experience success. Ultimately, they can see school as a place where boys can become young men.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper I use the terms, ‘Black’ and ‘African American’ interchangeably.
2. National Basketball Commissioner, David Stern imposed a dress code on athletes in 2005 that was thought to be specifically directed toward Allen Iverson.

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