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Preserving Innocence: Ending Perceived Adultification and Toxic Masculinity Toward Black Boys

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Preserving Innocence: Ending Perceived Adulthood and Toxic Masculinity Toward Black Boys

“From the moment they enter schools as preschoolers, Black boys are heavily scrutinized by educators for subjective reasons – being ‘rough’, ‘aggressive’, ‘unkind’, and more” (Ford, 2020, para 7). As Dr. Ford eloquently stated, Black boys have to endure some of the most oppressive and repressive experiences, due to their race and gender. Instead of Black boys’ actions seen as developmentally appropriate, they are frequently viewed from a deficit perspective as needing corrective or punitive actions. Thus, the term adulthood is appropriate and applicable for Black boys, because they are increasingly viewed as older and treated accordingly by educators, law enforcement officers, and other citizens. In 2017, Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez noted:

...adulthood is a form of dehumanization, robbing black children of the very essence of what makes childhood distinct from all other developmental periods: innocence. Adulthood contributes to a false narrative that black youths’ transgressions are intentional and malicious, instead of the result of immature decision making — a key characteristic of childhood. (p. 6)

Adultifying Black boys is not only detrimental to their holistic growth and success but is also counterproductive because it comes with consequences that often derail both educational and non-educational opportunities, such as being academically successful or even resulting in death (i.e., Jordan Davis, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice). Thus, it is important to note that we are far from becoming a post-racial society because Black boys are prevalently viewed as pathological. Many people still label Black boys as adults who are scary, criminals, intimidating, and in need of policing (Dancy, 2014). Ladson-Billings (2011) depicted this social phenomenon, with the following excerpt:

We see Black males as “problems” that our society must find ways to eradicate. We regularly determine them to be the root cause of most problems in school and society. We seem to hate their dress, their language, and their effect. We hate that they challenge authority and command so much social power. While the society apparently loves them in narrow niches and specific slots—music, basketball, football, track—we seem less comfortable with them in places like the national Honor Society, the debate team, or the computer club. (p. 9)

Developmentally and legally, children become adults, at age 18. Until this developmental time, they are boys and girls - not men and women.

The term *toxic masculinity* originated in the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and 1990s. It later found wide use in both academic and popular writing (see Flood, 2018). Both popular and social media discussions, during the 2010s, frequently use the term to refer to traditional and stereotypical norms of masculinity and manhood. Based on Flood’s assertions, the norms include expectations that boys and men must be active, aggressive, tough, daring, and dominant. With this in mind, the notion of toxic masculinity is frequently translated as acts of toughness and emotionlessness detrimental to men’s mental health based on a gender hierarchy (Noguera, 2008). It is common for young Black men and boys to be put in vicarious predicaments, where they feel compelled to personify toughness, protect themselves by exerting hostile expressions, and are stereotyped as if no father is present to teach them manhood. Moreover, toxic masculinity can negatively influence boys because what is deemed ‘healthy’ expressions of masculinity can be seen as not valuable and a sign of weakness, thereby leading to the approval of deleterious norms and values.

Furthermore, the adage “boys will be boys” sets a precedence that perpetuates double standards. In other words, boys can get a pass for behaviors considered unacceptable or detrimental to them, particularly if white. Meyer (2014) suggested that boys are often given an excuse for aggressive and inappropriate behaviors. Meyer further asserted that the “boys will be boys” phrase might limit boys from freely depicting a wide range of healthy behaviors. Instead, they exhibit stereotypical behaviors frequently associated with toxic masculinity. It is worth noting that implicit biases may transpire from others, affecting the way boys are treated, especially those who identify as Black and male. Further, implicit biases may translate into life changing consequences for Black boys, such as being handcuffed as an elementary student for exhibiting developmental behaviors and/or justified emotions, such as anger or righteous indignation. Regardless of the context or situation, Black boys benefit from having access to safe spaces, where they can express themselves in healthy, developmental, and cultural ways. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how educators and families can help Black boys create healthy relationships and positive emotional channels with others. Through two vignettes, we illustrate how adultification and toxic masculinity may manifest in education contexts. We also offer specific recommendations to educators and families in helping foster education success among Black boys.

Vignettes

Vignette 1 - Guilty Until Proven Innocent

LaMonte is a five-year-old, Black boy enrolled in a predominantly White and high socioeconomic status (SES) university-based preschool. His parents are professors and new to the university. The preschool is held in high regard in the university and community at-large. The family feels fortunate that they were able to get their son placed in the school. On another note, LaMonte enjoys reading and all types of sports. His parents proudly consider him a scholar-athlete. Thus, as a preschooler, he is average for his age in both height and weight.

Three days after attending the preschool, LaMonte received a negative report from his primary teacher, Ms. Patton, stating that he was too rough and aggressive. One of his classmates, a six-year-old White girl, has been complaining that LaMonte pushes her when playing. His parents are surprised and upset, because they have never seen their son behaving that way. Therefore, because Dr. Wilson’s schedule is more flexible, he arranges to visit the preschool the next day to observe his son. During recess or play time, LaMonte enthusiastically grabs two balls and shares one with a classmate. A white girl student, standing about three inches taller, snatches the ball from LaMonte who tells her that she is not nice and asks her to return it. She cries and runs complaining to the Ms. Patton, who soothes her and tells LaMonte to go to the office. Ms. Patton wastes no time blaming LaMonte for the girl’s tears, while ignoring the tears rolling down LaMonte’s cheeks. Thus, Dr. Wilson observed the entire incident with LaMonte and the little girl, as well as how Ms. Patton responded to the situation.

Vignette 2 - Alpha Male Syndrome

Deion, a 15-year-old Black male, is a caregiver of his two little brothers, while his mother works the evening shift at a local factory. During the school week, Deion has to function as an adult and caregivers to his siblings. However, when Deion comes to school, he has a hard time transitioning back into the role of a student and engaging his teachers who serve as authoritative figures, especially his Black male teachers. Mr. Percy, one of his teachers, continually reprimands him for being late to first period, due to dropping off his brothers to their school. Instead of informing Mr. Percy of his situation, Deion is disrespectful toward Mr. Percy and proceeds to walk out of class without permission. Ms. Fordham, an assistant principal, notices

Deion leaving class and has a conversation with him. She challenges him about being late to class like Mr. Percy, but he listens to her. She calms him down by soothing him and discussing his situation in a calm voice. Ms. Fordham walks him back to Mr. Percy class, where the three of them have a conversation and Deion agrees to go back to class and complete his in-class assignments.

In the two vignettes, a common theme is (mis)perceived hyper and toxic masculinity by two Black boys of different ages and with different backgrounds. In the first vignette, LaMonte's teacher misperceives his behavior as being aggressive and rough without ever observing his actual behavior at recess. Instead, the teacher assumes that the White girl is telling the truth and is victimized by LaMonte. In the second vignette, Mr. Percy has not taken the time to understand the life experiences and challenges Deion is facing. Ms. Fordham found that Deion was carrying major family responsibilities with his siblings and that these family commitments were affecting his class punctuality and his ability to focus on his studies in Mr. Percy's class. It is clear that Mr. Percy assumed that Deion's tardiness was intentional. Next, we unpack this reality and offer culturally relevant educational recommendations for the two aforementioned Black boys and could easily be extended to other Black boys.

Contributors to the Adulthood and Toxic Masculinity of Black Boys

Historical Context

Since the early 1600s, when Africans were brought to the Americas enslaved, Black boys and men have been seen as a threat and treated as subhuman. Any form of disobedience or perceived act of defiance against the authority of Whites, particularly White men, was met with swift and cruel punishment such as amputation of limbs (i.e., hand or foot), being tarred and feathered, and death. After slavery ended, Blacks accrued some power during reconstruction, but it quickly diminished with the rise of Jim Crow laws. As a result, Black men were accused of crimes they often did not commit, such as rape (of white females), stealing, or confronting Whites. The aforementioned accusations have resulted in false imprisonment, lynchings, and, killings to make an example of Black men to stay in their place. The demonization of Black men through the previously mentioned atrocities and microaggressions and the labels "guilty until proven innocent," lazy, and unintelligent have influenced their vocational, educational, and quality life outcomes (Taylor et al., 2019), which is discussed next.

Underrepresentation in Gifted and Talented Education. In many reports, numerous scholars have analyzed the representation of students in gifted and talented education (GATE) by race and gender. Using the Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for several years, these scholars have consistently found that Black males are the most underrepresented in GATE. Their absence or discrepancy rate is often approximately 55% (e.g., Ford, 2013; Ford & King, 2014; Wright et al., 2020). While tests play a central role in their underrepresentation, white educators' under-referral of them for screening, identification, and placement is *the* primary barrier; educators are the gatekeepers who are blinded by deficit thinking about Black males of all ages.

Overrepresentation in Special Education. While Black boys are underrepresented in GATE programs, conversely, they are gravely overrepresented in special education high-incidence categories (i.e., emotional and behavioral disorders, developmental delay, ADHD, intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities). The aforementioned special education categories are frequently stigmatized and riddled with subjectivity. The degree of overrepresentation ranges around 50% in each area. The Office for Civil Rights has reported that

Black boys are three times more likely to be in special education compared to white boys. Racial prejudice is undeniable.

Discipline and policing Black Boys. The policing of Black boys starts from birth, noted by Upchurch (1997) in *Convicted in the womb*. His compelling autobiography presents a gut-wrenching story of systemic racism in society, the justice system, and schools. The Office for Civil Rights' *First look* report reveals that Black preschoolers are 19% of schools but a whopping 52% of suspensions. This early and ongoing policing, referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline, reinforces Upchurch's lived experiences, which is the story of far too many Black boys, including Tamir Rice who was murdered by police while playing with a toy gun. The criminalization of Black boys can be seen in racial microaggressions, specifically assumption of criminality (Sue et al., 2007): (a) presumed guilty of misbehaving and crimes; (b) found guilty without a hearing or trial; and (c) considered guilty until or if proven innocent.

A discussion of discipline is incomplete without attention to racial inequities whereby white boys are presumed innocent until or if ever found guilty for the *same* and *more egregious* behaviors than Black boys. Schools and society at-large are frequently seeped in double standards, prejudice, and discrimination, which are easily seen in the cases of LaMonte and Deion.

Recommendations

The above scenarios are all too common in school settings, even in preschools and daycares. In the two vignettes, we see a White girl's tears, adultification, and blaming the victim. Educators must do more to protect Black boys from the academic, psychological, and emotional harm resulting from adultification and toxic masculinity. Further, we present recommendations based on how educators can prevent the adultification of Black boys, as well as intervene if the issue is already present in school settings.

Prevention and Intervention

Cultural Responsiveness. Ladson-Billings (1995) posited that culturally responsive pedagogy is founded, based on three elements: (a) the need for all students to experience academic success; (b) the need for teachers to be culturally competent; and (c) the need for teachers to build their own cultural consciousness by confronting the status quo in society and schools. As the title of this article poignantly notes, we want to preserve the innocence of Black boys by training educators and parents about their culturally-based developmental needs, as well as bringing awareness to the issues that stigmatize Black boys and misperceives them as adults or full of toxicity. First, educators and parents must break the cycle of deficit perceptions early. For example, LaMonte's situation could have been prevented, if preschool teachers were giving training on how to work effectively with Black boys, if the preschool had diversity in their teacher workforce, and if teachers had been given anti-racist training. Cultural responsiveness training for educators on Black boys would give them the tools and skills needed to respond accordingly.

Rather than giving LaMonte a negative report expeditiously, his teacher should have conducted several observations of both children interacting. With this in mind, Ms. Percy should avoid labels, especially for Black boys, given how they result in unwarranted treatment and negative expectations from educators that could cause LaMonte and other Black boys to disengage in school and, even worse, act out these labels and stereotypes. Moreover, Ms. Percy should have had a conversation with LaMonte's parents to get their perspective rather than automatically blaming their son.

Anti-racism. Anti-racist training is needed for educators because many hold racial biases toward Black boys (Will, 2020). Educators need to be culturally responsive and well versed in advocacy. More specifically, educators should advocate closing negative expectation gaps, calling out the school-to-prison pipeline, advocating for equitable treatment in discipline, and addressing underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs. Kendi (2019) urges individuals to examine policies that promote racism and hinder racial justice. School counselors are some of the school building professionals, who are fit to implement this training. When trained properly, they are uniquely capable to start a preventative approach to working with Black boys. They also uniquely positioned to work with students, educators, and families as well.

Collaboration. School-family-community partnerships (Bryan & Henry, 2021) can play a key role in ensuring that Black boys are protected from adultification. Further, Bryan, Williams, and Griffin (2016) noted that school-family-community partnerships rooted in equity could produce positive outcomes for Black boys. School counselors play a very important role in bringing stakeholders together to address the academic needs, socioemotional development, and college and career readiness of students, especially ethnically and racially diverse learners (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Erford, 2019; Hines et al., 2020). Within these partnerships, they and other educators can assist the families of Black boys, by offering guidance and suggestions on how to better work with their children. Moreover, these partnerships between families and educators can give spaces for Black boys to express their experiences within the school setting and without non-judgmental views. Working with families to understand Black boys can lead to policy changes (e.g., gifted and talented identification, special education referrals, and disciplinary decisions) and, thus, a shift in educator practices.

Relationship Building. Educators must develop authentic, genuine relationships with boys. These relationships are created by spending time with each other, listening to understand each other, and acknowledging the experiences of each party in the relationship. As with Deion in Vignette 2, Mr. Percy needed to develop a better relationship with Deion, such as the one with Ms. Fordham. In 2016, Nelson conducted a qualitative study with 27 Black boys and learning relationships with their teachers; they found that higher levels of classroom engagement and learning came from having stronger relationships with their teachers. Brooms (2021) found in his research study with 20 Black males that their relationship with school counselors improved college aspirations and provided important access to postsecondary information for admissions and enrollment. Clearly, strong relationships between Black boys and educators cannot be overstated.

Diverse Teacher Recruitment. We recommend improvements to the educator pipeline by recruiting educators from diverse backgrounds. Eighty percent of the teacher workforce is White, while close to 20% are from underrepresented backgrounds (NCES, 2019). The root cause of this underrepresentation stems from desegregation where Black students were primarily sent to White schools causing Black schools to close and lay off Black educators. At the same time, White schools would not hire Black educators (Carter-Andrews et al., 2019). Having more Black educators working with Black students, especially Black boys, has shown to improve school outcomes (Easton-Brooks, 2014). Earlier researchers (Achinstein et al., 2008; Dee, 2004; Easton-Brooks et al., 2010; Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011) refer to the aforementioned as cultural matching and refer to culturally relevant pedagogy, along with congruence to home cultures in order to help students of color perform optimally in schools. Cultural matching is a term used to describe how ethnically and racially diverse students gain access to learning opportunities if school stakeholders offer more culturally congruent, compatible, responsive, or synchronized

learning environments that connect with their home cultures (Achinstein et al., 2008). Such individuals can serve as role models and positive examples of adults for students. To that end, we suggest that schools actively recruit educators of color from preservice programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as specific programs designed to recruit underrepresented Black male teachers like Call Me Mister and Brothers Empowered to Teach (BE2T) initiatives.

Strengths-Based Perspectives and Paradigms. “It is important that teachers focus on what Black boys know, understand, and can do (as opposed to what they cannot do or what they do not know or understand)” (Wright, 2019, para 3). Educators must highlight the assets that Black boys bring to school rather than focusing on deficit thinking. It is also important that they also focus on what Black boys are doing right in the classroom and beyond. How can educators incorporate these strengths to enhance Black boys’ academic success, socio-emotional growth, and their postsecondary readiness? Hines and colleagues (2020) focused on postsecondary readiness for 10th grade Black boys and noted that a group counseling approach could be successful in increasing Black male college matriculation. In particular, doing so highlights and reinforces the resilience and persistence needed to accomplish goals and higher achievement.

Training Parents and Families. It is important that parents and other family members are aware of the different ways they can perpetuate the adultification of their Black sons. Using terms, such as little man, man up, and toughen up, reinforce that Black boys must act older and be more mature than their actual age. Again, school counselors are in a great position to work with parents (ASCA, 2019) on strategies to reframe how they use words that may harm Black boys. Again, highlighting their abilities and assets, such as calling them leaders and scholars, reshapes the narrative about Black boys.

Alpha Male Syndrome. As discussed in the second vignette with Deion, many Black boys take on parental and leadership roles at home, especially when a father is absent or a male figure is not present. When challenged by another authoritative male figure, Black boys may feel threatened or intimidated and, as result, act out in negative ways. Therefore, it is import for educators to soothe or use disarming language to de-escalate or avoid confrontations. At times, a female educator can provide motherly engagement with Black boys to encourage them in meaningful ways (e.g., get them to respond to a request).

Replace Resource Officers with Mental Health Counselors. Black boys, specifically those with disabilities, are five times as likely to be arrested or harmed by a school police officer as their peers and racial counterparts without disabilities (ACLU, n.d.). Moreover, the ACLU found that 14 million students are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker (para, 7) and that school safety and positive school outcomes were associated with having mental health staff in schools. Providing mental health staff in schools can give Black boys the needed resources to be holistically successful and not be criminalized for behaviors that are associated with socioemotional issues. To this end, mental health staff include school counselors, nurses, social workers, and school psychologists (ACLU, n.d.).

School stakeholders, who are culturally competent, serve as positive role models for their students, motivate their learners to attain higher academic achievement, broaden Black male students’ career aspirations, and affirm their students’ cultural identities and practices (McNamara, 2004; Su, 1997). The academic success of Black students is influenced by the social support and encouragement that they gain from their teachers (and other school stakeholders) (Brooms, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009). School stakeholders should acknowledge that all students in the school are competent based on their unique lived experiences (Gonzalez et al.,

2005), capitalizing on their students' funds of knowledge. These school stakeholders are caring adults who set high expectations for performance. They also provide advice and guidance to Black male students on navigating life beyond high school and be able to counsel youth to avoid common pitfalls. School stakeholders should be familiar with the Black male culture (e.g., masculinity issues that adversely influence students known to have a negative perception of academic achievement), such as the case of Deion, who must juggle different roles in the home compared to in school.

Professional Development

Professional development for educators is a necessity to combat adultification and toxic masculinity of Black boys. Educators need to be exposed to theories and definitions of prejudice (i.e., thought) and discrimination (i.e., behavior). Allport's (1954) theory of prejudice is a supposition that can help educators with anti-bias training to assist them in understanding how bias and beliefs play a role in undermining the success of Black boys. Allport's theory includes five degrees of prejudice— antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination. Antilocution, avoidance, and discrimination are the three applicable degrees of prejudice which educators need knowledge of to be culturally responsive. Antilocution involves individuals stereotyping, gossiping, ethnic jokes, and verbal abuse toward a certain group and, in this case, Black boys. Avoidance — white flight — pertains to one group (usually Whites) avoiding, eliminating, or making another group (Black boys) invisible. In other words, some White educators seek to avoid or decrease interactions with Black boys by expelling or suspending them from school rather than engaging them, and working to overcome their own beliefs and biases. Last, discrimination involves denying Black boys' rights and access to resources and, ultimately, the humanity needed for them to be who they are in educational settings.

Merton's (1949) typology of prejudice and discrimination can assist educators in understanding whether they are prejudiced or not and if they engage in discrimination. Such a typology can help educators determine how they think and feel about Black boys in addition to knowing if their attitudes serve as a barrier for this group. The four types of prejudice include:

1. All-weather liberal: An individual who is not prejudiced and does not practice discrimination.
2. Fair-weather liberal: An individual who is not prejudiced but practices discrimination.
3. All-weather bigot: An individual who is both prejudiced and discriminates.
4. Fair-weather bigot: An individual who is not prejudiced and does not discriminate.

We recommend that school counselors and other educators, who have had training in cultural competency, facilitate professional development on Allport's theory and Merton's typology. This training is likely to help educators plan and prepare to work in culturally competent and anti-racist ways with Black boys.

Conclusion

Cultivating an environment (in and out of school) for Black boys to engage in authentic expression and developmentally appropriate behaviors can help improve their school outcomes and also create spaces, where they are affirmed, celebrated and welcomed. Educators and families play a significant role in changing deficit-based narrative about Black boys, which starts with how they view these boys, what is spoken into their lives, and how adults treat them. Fredrick Douglass once stated, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

This quote eloquently reflects the approach we should take with Black boys so they can live healthy and productive lives in the United States and abroad.

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