The Problem *with* Black Boys: Race, Gender, and Discipline in Christian and Private Elementary Schools

Sharoni D. Little
The Strategist Company, LLC, Los Angeles, CA, USA

La Verne A. Tolbert
Urban Ministries, Inc., Calumet City, IL, USA

Abstract

In Christian, private, and public schools, Black boys are forced to endure educational environments that promulgate the stereotype of their supposed intellectual inadequacy and "troublesome" behavior. Deficit-based narratives, fueled by historical racist and sexist stereotypes, contend that Black boys are deviant, disengaged, disruptive, undisciplined, unintelligent, problematic, confrontational, threatening, and difficult to teach – all in a place that should be safe and affirming – schools. In this article, we examine how racial and gender stereotypes reify the educational plight of Black boys, and negatively influence key educational foci, including teacher expectations, pedagogy, curricula, institutional climate/culture, student assessment, and disciplinary matters.

Corresponding author:
La Verne A. Tolbert, Urban Ministries Inc, 1551 Regency Court, Calumet City, IL 60409, USA.
Email: lvtolbert@urbanministries.com

Introduction

In many Christian, private, and public schools throughout the country, Black boys are having to endure educational environments that promulgate the stereotype of their supposed intellectual inadequacy and label their attitudes and actions in the classroom as problematic. From preschool to college, deficit-based narratives, fueled by historical racist and sexist stereotypes, contend that African American boys and young men are deviant, disengaged, disruptive, undisciplined, unintelligent, problematic, confrontational, threatening, and difficult to teach – all in a place that should be safe and affirming. Studies have shown that these damaging perceptions often impact Black boys' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and overall learning outcomes, and unduly contribute to their disproportionate suspension, expulsion, and drop-out rates (Little, 2005, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 1998).

In this article, we examine how racial and gender stereotypes reify the "educational plight" of Black boys and negatively influence key educational foci including teacher expectations, pedagogy, curricula, and institutional climate/culture. Teacher bias also affects the degree of discipline Black boys receive as compared to white students as well as how Black boys are assessed in the classroom. As scholars, educators, parents, and community members, this disturbing reality compels us, as Isaiah 1:17 states, to "Learn to do right; seek justice," and "defend the oppressed." To accentuate this truth, two African American mothers share their sons' experiences in Christian and private schools.

Suspensions, Expulsions, and Disciplining Black Boys

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois stated that for America, the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line (p. 1), a truth that persists into the twenty-first century. From its founding to the present, the "color line" is one of America's primary antagonists. For Black boys, race has been the pervasive lens that has shaped their material reality in various aspects of their lives, particularly their educational experiences. According to a 2012 report on Black males and education, the Schott Foundation (2015) found that Black males are suspended and expelled much more frequently than other racial groups and are largely underrepresented in gifted programs, honors, and advanced placement courses.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. While 4.6% of White students are suspended, the suspension rate for Black students is 16.4%. Beginning as early as preschool, Black children, who represent only 18% of the total preschool enrollment, account for 48% of preschool children who receive more than one out-of-school suspension. White students, who represent as much as 43% of the total preschool enrollment, account for only 26% of preschool children who

receive more than one out-of-school suspension. The excessive suspension of Black children is for the same behaviors and actions of White students.

Fabelo et al. (2011), in their study of 3,900 public middle and high schools in Texas, found little consensus of how, when, and against whom school rules are enforced; suspension and expulsion rates varied significantly even among similar schools with comparable student compositions. Their findings suggest that suspensions and expulsions of Black students may contribute to high dropout rates and involvement in the criminal justice system, consequences that should alert school districts across the United States.

> In communities across the country, educators, juvenile justice system officials, service providers, students and parents, and advocates are also taking steps to implement innovative approaches that yield different disciplinary results. Nationally, a growing number of advocacy organizations and membership associations are drawing increased attention for their efforts to come up with more effective and fair approaches to school discipline. And a growing body of research is supporting and expanding upon these efforts. An essential next step is to convene experts, policymakers and advocates from education, juvenile justice, health, and child welfare systems to build on the important work of these stakeholders and to begin developing a consensus around approaches that will improve outcomes for students and teachers. (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. xiii)

In a study of 364 elementary and middle schools, Black boys were overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and expulsion from school for behavior that was similar to their White male peers (Skiba et al., 2011). For Black boys, Ferguson (2000) argued, "their transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naiveté," which both "adultifies" them and deprives them of basic empathy (p. 83).

This material reality creates painful and enduring experiences that undermine African American boys' personal and academic success and render them prone to the unwarranted disciplinary gaze of teachers and administrators. When Black boys are denied their innate curiosity, expression, and sense of being, they are forced to "learn" in an environment that is both dehumanizing and devaluing and that simultaneously constructs them as the problematic "other." Dr. Tyrone Howard, in his seminal book, *Black Male(d): Peril and Promise in the Education of African American Males* (2013), argues:

> Many of the portrayals of African American males historically have been centered within an anti-intellectual framework that portrays them as culturally and socially deviant, criminal minded, academically inept, and morally bankrupt. Over the past four decades, a number of works have sought to disrupt these accounts of African American males and create an image that offers a more affirming and humanizing depiction of them in schools and society. Despite these efforts, African American males continue to be undereducated, over-incarcerated, socially and culturally

misunderstood, and in pursuit of an identity that allows them to be viewed as intellectually adept and worthy of inclusion in the American dream. (Howard, 2013, p. 5)

While many Black students persist, are resilient, and academically successful, we must examine at what personal, social, cultural, and academic cost? Studies have shown that "students who are suspended from school lose important instructional time, are less likely to graduate on time, and are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system" (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018, p. 1).

Because of societal stereotypes affecting African American boys, teachers frequently negatively react to normal young [B]lack boy behavior. Constant reprimands instill a sense of being "less than" from a very early age . . . Many [B]lack males tend to be so alienated from school that they do not feel that the teachers or the setting mean them any good. (Delpit, 2012, pp. 15–16)

Societal stereotypes may be a factor in implicit teacher bias, which is:

. . . the automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways . . . implicit biases about sex and race may influence how those behaviors are perceived and how they are addressed, creating a vicious cycle over time exacerbating inequalities. (Gilliam et al., 2016, p. 3)

According to Gilliam et al. (2016), this bias begins in preschool when Black boys are expelled at disproportionate rates. Their study demonstrates that teachers expect "challenging behaviors with Black preschoolers and especially Black boys" (pp. 11–12). It is no wonder that by the time they are teenagers, Black youth express frustration with their schools and cite racism as a "major problem" (Wright, 2017, p. 37).

The Teacher Only Sees Me

At Justin Page Middle School in Minneapolis, African American students are 338 percent more likely to be suspended than their White peers. Principal Erin Rathke repeatedly hears this complaint: "The teacher only sees me" (Green, 2018). While Rathke admits this is probably true, schools throughout the city also recognize that there is a problem.

The Minneapolis school district suspends an inordinate number of Black students compared with White ones, and it is struggling to figure out why. Last year, districtwide, Black students were 41 percent of the overall student population, but made up 76 percent of the suspensions. (Green, 2018, p. 1)

Bernadeia Johnson, a former Minneapolis school superintendent, launched her own review of discipline referrals for kindergarten boys after the federal government began investigating her district. She discovered that the descriptions of White children by teachers included "gifted but can't use his words" and "high strung," with their actions excused because they "had a hard day." However Black children were "destructive" and "violent," and "cannot be managed . . . When you see something like that and you're a leader, and you're trying to figure out how to move the school system forward – it was alarming," Ms. Johnson reported (Green, 2018).

No matter how young, Black boys are often labeled as bad, a reference not only confined to their conduct, but a stigma that also encompasses their character. Research demonstrates that Black school-age boys are more likely to be disciplined and experience increased rates of suspension and expulsion from school (Badger et al., 2018; Noguera, 2003). In her book, *Learning While Black* (2001), Dr. Hale indicates that teachers who are White females relate first to White female students, then to White male students, then to Black girls, and lastly to Black males. The following poignant observations of two brilliant and curious young Black male scholars disturbingly embody the experiences that research describes.

Two Black Boys' Journeys: Scholar "Martin" and Scholar "Malcolm"

"You do know that private Christian schools were started after school integration because White Christians didn't want their children to go to school with Black children, don't you?" This announcement at the close of a teacher-training session in Dallas, Texas was in response to Dr. Tolbert detailing the benefits detailing the benefits of private Christian schools vs. public schools. Months later, this comment on the birth of Christian schools came to mind when an African American mother expressed concern that her son, who attends a private Christian school, had been suspended twice and might be experiencing racial bias. She reported the following:

Scholar "Martin"

Our oldest son is ten years old and in the 4th grade. A Christian school seemed like an excellent choice for our family. Though our experience has not been overt, I do believe that race plays into how our son is perceived. He is an athletically gifted mixed child who stands a head taller than most of his class.

Martin is constantly getting into trouble during basketball in Physical Education class (PE). He is signaled out by other children for normal on-court behavior and blamed for every mishap. His PE teacher says there are times when Martin is accused of an action although he is physically on the other side of the gym.

The challenge is that administration officials agree with these distorted student reports. It took two years for us to fully realize that Martin is being stigmatized and portrayed as an aggressive bully. When I ask his subject teachers about Martin's

behavior in class, the reports are glowingly positive. This is confusing! On one hand, we are hearing about this aggressive boy with issues, and on the other hand, we are told that he excels in the classroom. How could one child have such extremes?

This pattern is especially troublesome considering that we are in a Christian environment. Reluctantly, his father and I began to suspect that another factor must be at play. Is it the color of his skin? Are administration officials less tolerant of our brown boy?

The principal, who is a White female, has never supported Martin and, in fact, she has suspended him twice, and he's only ten years old. When we meet with her, she claims to know our son better than we do, and she uses unusually harsh terms to describe his behavior. The head of the school correctly informed the principal that she has her facts wrong, but defiant, the principal refuses to acknowledge anything positive about Martin.

Our sons are not White women. We aren't raising White women. We don't want our sons to be passive, mild, or complacent. We are raising strong Black men who have societal, emotional, cultural, educational hurdles and stigmas to overcome . . . strong, meek, smart, humble, kind, loving, Black men . . . our sons.

As the next experience demonstrates, although White teachers/administrators are quick to see so-called "misbehavior," they seldom recognize when Black boys are academically gifted. In fact, studies show that African American students, who have comparable test scores to those of White students, are disproportionately assigned and underrepresented in gifted programs (Grissom & Redding, 2016). In *African American Boys: Identity, Culture, and Development*, Belgrave and Brevard (2015) contend, "teachers who hold stereotypical beliefs about African American children are more likely to see negative attributes in other areas" (p. 81). The common assertion among African Americans that they have to be twice as good to get half as much is worth noting here.

The same week that scholar Martin's mother sought counsel, another parent reported that her son was experiencing bias in his school, a Montessori private school. Montessori schools began with Maria Montessori, who originated a pedagogical approach to creatively teaching children in a poor, inner-city district in Italy during the early 1900s. Her strategy, which spawned Montessori schools throughout the United States, focuses on developing a learning environment that creatively nurtures children's desire to learn (https://amshq.org/Montessori-Education/History-of-Montessori-Education/Biography-of-Maria-Montessori).

Scholar "Malcolm"

By the time my son completed kindergarten, he was reading at a 5th-grade level and was proficient in algebra. By second grade, Malcolm was reading at an 8th grade level. He could name the capitals of each of the 50 states; he also knows them by shape and can identify on a map where they belong. In fact, he knows all of the countries on all of the continents!

When we visit museums, which is often, our son prefers the planetarium. His passion is astronomy and aerospace engineering. He constructed robotic Legos in 1st grade even though it was designed for 12–14 year olds. If we are in the mall, four out of five times, he wants to go to the bookstore rather than to the toy store.

Because we believe Malcolm is gifted, we decided to educate him in the Montessori school system where students learn at their own pace. Everything was going well until we enrolled him into a new school in the 4th grade. We noticed a difference when we asked, "What did you learn today?" He was uncharacteristically nonchalant and less excited about studying. We were shocked the day he told us he didn't like school!

Immediately we scheduled a parent-teacher conference and were told that Malcolm is unfocused, has a lot of energy, meanders around the class, and doesn't complete assignments. The teacher said he has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and that we needed to have him tested. We knew this wasn't true because at 11 years old, he has no problem following directions and he sits still for three hours to read a book, which is his norm. At night when I check on him, I often reprimand him for reading a 500-page, 12-volume book when he should be asleep.

We had him tested for ADHD and the results were negative. We discovered that he finishes his work quickly so he spends his time helping other students. Then he gets into trouble for talking and is sent to the principal's office. When Malcolm complained that the teacher only sees him, I said, "Of course the teacher will only see you. If there are all red dots on the bulletin board and one green dot, which dot will stand out?"

Malcolm's teacher doesn't think he is an advanced student even though his Stanford's grades are in the 98th percentile for math and reading. He was tested at Sylvan, and he is on level 13 in reading/vocabulary (yes, a high school graduate!) and in math, he's in the 7th grade. Malcolm won the school's "General, Organic, and Biological Chemical Award," surpassed the 8th graders in geography, and came second in the National Geographic Bee, which competes on world geography and topography.

We pulled him out of the Montessori school and now I homeschool. Happily, our son is once again enjoying learning.

We were in California recently and visited his previous Montessori school. What a surprise to learn that three of the four Black boys had left because of the following incident: One of the Black boys told the teacher that he was feeling ill, but she made him go outside to play anyway. When he returned to class, he threw up. Instead of sending him to the nurse and calling the janitor to clean up, the teacher sent this child to the bathroom to get paper towels and made the child clean up! Needless to say, that was his last day at that school.

Is there universal and pervasive mistreatment of Black boys by teachers and subsequently by school administration? If so, is this problem with Black boys significant enough to warrant immediate remedial intervention? Christian educators and educators who are Christian might consider implementing the following pedagogical strategies, beginning with their perceptions of the color "black".

Correct a theological misnomer

At a recent Christian education conference in North Carolina, Dr. Tolbert was leading a discussion about creative teaching methods when a White Sunday school teacher proudly demonstrated how she leads children to Christ using the Wordless Book – a popular evangelistic tool consisting of brightly colored pages that doesn't contain any words. The teacher explains each page color to teach children about salvation beginning with gold, which represents the streets of heaven that are paved with gold.

"I teach them that the black page is for sin; sin is black. Then I turn to the white page and tell them Jesus can make our hearts white as snow." This teacher's bold proclamation, reified a historically marginalizing ethos at a conference filled primarily with White Sunday school teachers. Seizing this teachable moment, Dr. Tolbert gently explained that, though the Wordless Book may be a valuable tool, it's not how God colors sin:

> "Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord.
> "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
> Though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool."
>
> (Isaiah 1:18, NKJV)

A thorough word study demonstrates that nowhere does the Bible refer to black as bad or state that the color of sin is black (Tolbert, 2012). The Bible was not written from a Eurocentric worldview that assumes "black" is bad and "white" is good. When White children are taught that black is bad and equate this color with sin, how can they avoid relating negatively to individuals who self-identify as Black? How might African American children feel to learn that sin is the same color that people call their skin? "As another has well said, to handicap a student by teaching him that his [B]lack face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching" (Woodson, 2016, p. 119).

So what to do with the Wordless Book? Rip out the black page! Substitute it with a red/crimson page. The subsequent red page symbolizing Christ's death on the Cross now becomes even more illustrative because Jesus's blood *covers* and *cancels* the previous red page of sin. The integrity of Scripture is maintained through Christian education that is theologically correct and biblically accurate.

Reframing language is key to the task of reshaping images and perceptions about Black children in general and Black boys in particular. Due to mental associations between color and morality, research demonstrates that a negative bias exists, which perceives that dark skin is equal to bad actions (Devine, 1989). That black is bad and sin is black has been promoted in Sunday school curricula for so long that Christians might actually think "black as sin" is in the Bible. Black children are rarely portrayed as godly or good and are generally absent from pictures in most curricula.

To address this misperception, Dr. Melvin E. Banks, Sr. founded Urban Ministries, Inc. (UMI) in 1970 with the intentional goal of portraying positive images of African American children in Sunday school curricula and media. UMI's materials highlight Black history and spotlight the fact that biblical history is rooted in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In 2017, the Evangelical Christian Publisher's Association (ECPA) presented the Kenneth N. Taylor Lifetime Achievement Award to Dr. Banks in Colorado Springs at the annual event attended by 150 leaders in Christian publishing.

> Dr. Banks was recognized for his crucial contributions to contextualize the Gospel to the African American community. Recognizing the dominance of Eurocentric images and ideas in Christian publishing, Dr. Banks identified the unique opportunity to serve African Americans and people of African descent with relevant, contextual resources. He founded UMI to further this idea of an African American Christian publishing house that would uniquely serve this audience. Under Dr. Banks' direction, UMI has grown to be a leading publisher of Christian education and other resources for churches in the African American community and throughout the world. (https://urbanministries.com/press-release-ecpa-presents-dr-melvin-e-banks-sr-kenneth-n-taylor-lifetime-achievement-award/)

Complete mandatory training

To confront and disrupt the harmful effects of deficit-based instruction for Black boys, teachers must use culturally responsive pedagogical tools and strategies. Designed to ensure an inclusive and culturally relevant educational environment, teachers must view culturally responsive pedagogy as:

> [a] framework that recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that students from diverse groups bring to schools [and] seek to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing students' academic, social, emotional, cultural, and psychological and physiological well-being. (Howard, 2013, pp. 67–68)

Correcting inherent bias necessitates conscious effort and is challenging for everyone, including White female teachers. Researchers DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2011) and Rist (2000) suggest that teachers' own prejudices against Black students resulted in lower expectations, which ultimately affected the academic achievement of those Black students. The teacher's low expectation becomes the baseline for Black students' academic achievement.

Recognizing and admitting that prejudice exists is foundational to welcoming corrective change. Administration officials and teachers might be required to complete mandatory professional development training to discuss culturally relevant

pedagogy, curricula, and implicit bias with experts in the field. Facebook, for example, has launched a course, "Diversity Training: Managing Unconscious Bias" to confront racism at its roots, which is available on You Tube. Starbucks also instituted Anti-Bias Training for its employees after two black men who were waiting for a colleague were forcibly removed and jailed (https://youtu.be/o__5xvIE3bU).

The following incident demonstrates why training is so vital. At a Christian school, an administrator sent an email to all parents, faculty, and staff alerting them to a Black male who, she said, was enticing children to get into his car. She emphasized the color of his skin, described the make and model of the car and its location across the street from the school. After receiving the email, the Black father responded that this description fit him. He explained that his family was new to the school and this was his first day picking up his son. Unwilling to apologize in a subsequent email, the administrator justified her error with the excuse, "It's better to be safe than sorry." Her inherent bias not only constructed the father as a potential threat to students and the broader community, but also reinforced a prevalent myth that Black men are threatening and violent.

Centralize Black intellectualism in the curriculum

A school doesn't have to be predominantly African American to recognize and celebrate Black history, for Black history is American history. Celebrating the countless accomplishments of African Americans is educative for children, faculty, and staff. Researching, reporting, and honoring the notable inventions, discoveries, explorations, designs, and achievements of Blacks, in addition to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, elevates this community in the psyche of all learners, including White teachers.

Perpetuating the cultural narrative that Blacks' contribution to American history is minor at best or non-existent at worse denies the factual account of the economic force that brought slaves to America's shores (Beckert, 2014). Intentionally teaching Black history affirms the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual experience of African Americans and corrects distorted perceptions. Not teaching Black history reinforces White supremacy by implying that Whites are the only ones who invented, discovered, explored, designed, and achieved.

During the Enlightenment, scholars such as Montesquieu, Blumenbach, Voltaire, Hume, Jefferson, and Kant promoted the "intellectual" legitimacy of White supremacy. In his essay, *Of National Characters*, Philosopher David Hume (1753) declared:

> I am apt to suspect the [N]egroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. (p. 108)

Philosopher Immanuel Kant, in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), advanced similar racist sentiments, when he maintained, "So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color" (pp. 110–111).

These attitudes epitomized Enlightenment essentialist thinking, which were purportedly aimed at eradicating prejudice and oppressive authority through the process of critical reasoning. Instead, they articulated a racist ideology designed to construct Blacks as a distinct, inferior "other," incapable of intellectual achievement.

Each of the philosophers failed to recognize the numerous intellectual contributions made by Africans, African Americans, and the Ancient Egyptians, many who historically identified as Black Africans, who are credited with several inventions including the oldest known alphabet, the art and science of engineering (as typified by the pyramids), the surveying process, the decimal system, the astronomical calendar, and many mathematical formulas such as geometric and algebraic equations. More contemporary Black inventors and intellectuals include Alexander Miles (elevator, 1887), Granville Woods (trolley car, multiplex telegraph system, railway air breaks, steam boiler and the radiator, 1884–1887), John Standard (refrigerator, 1894), L. S. Burridge and N. R. Marsham (typewriter, 1885), Robert Flemming Jr. (guitar, 1886), Thomas Carrington (range oven, 1876), Dr. Daniel Hale Williams (performed first open heart surgery, 1893), Garrett Morgan (gas mask, 1914 and automatic traffic signal, 1923), Dr. Charles Drew (invented preservation of blood plasma and blood bank, 1940), and Philip Emeagwali (world's fastest computer, 1989) to name a few (Little, 2005).

Culturally diversify the workforce

Since White teachers overwhelmingly teach Black students, Grissom and Redding recommend diversifying the teacher workforce to reflect more teachers of color (2016). Not only does this provide role models for all students, it also increases the likelihood of culturally relevant instruction and improved teacher retention rates in schools with large percentages of Black students. Increasing the number of African American teachers also increases teacher referrals of gifted students to gifted programs and ensures more parent-teacher discussions (Grissom & Redding, 2016).

Conclusion

As Christian educators, students, and scholars, we must confront, dismantle, and (re)frame the conversation in educational institutions from the problem "with" Black boys to the historical problem related to the stigmatizing and racialized practices and perceptions that deprive Black boys of a quality education. "We never know who the young child will grow to become, so we must see every child as sent to us by God and use every opportunity to teach with excellence" (Tolbert, 2000).

Christian educators, and teachers and administrators in private schools must examine the prevailing narratives that are perpetuated about Black boys. And yes, we are responsible for evaluating the teachers, administrators, culture, climate, and curricula to ensure that these reflect and celebrate the rich mosaic of *all* people, including African American boys.

Reflection/discussion questions

What is the prevailing narrative of Black boys in the academic institutions in which you serve or attend? Who shapes and perpetuates this narrative? Is this narrative a deficit or asset orientation?

What pedagogical and curricular strategies can be used to affirm, respect, and value Black boys in educational institutions?

What training and knowledge is needed to prepare teachers to create an inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students?

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