Black Boys Matter:

The Eight Biggest Obstacles Facing Young African American Males and How to Overcome Them

By Matthew Lynch

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the children of color who have been failed by the U.S. education system. These children are the collateral damage that should spur us to create lasting change.

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Introduction

“Black People Can’t Be Doctors”

When I was in elementary school, one of my teachers periodically brought professionals from the area to our class to talk about their careers. On one occasion, she brought in a Black male doctor from a local hospital. He spoke for about 15 minutes and then opened up the floor for questions. One of my friends (also a Black male) raised his hand. “Are you really a doctor?” he asked. The man replied that he was, and my friend retorted, “Black people can’t be doctors!” My friend echoed what the entire class must have been thinking. I know that thought had surfaced in my mind.

Sure, we had seen Black doctors on television and in movies, but we thought they were make-believe, like the cartoons we watched on Saturday mornings. We only believed what we could experience or see for ourselves. And since we had been to plenty of family clinics and hospitals and had never seen a Black doctor there, we automatically believed that the speaker was not being truthful. That’s how brainwashed we were.

I was born and raised in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, a small town about 30 miles south of Jackson, with a heavily African American population. I grew up in impoverished conditions and learned early on how to live without modern conveniences. I could seldom afford to go to the movies, and even when I managed to save up the money, transportation was not always available. I had a two parent household, and my parents made sure that me and my older sisters were on the right track.

My older sisters, Tammy and Angelina, both of them did well in school. Tammy received a scholarship to attend community college and eventually transferred to a four-year college from which she graduated. Angelina also graduated with a bachelor’s degree and went on to earn a master’s degree. I graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi with a bachelor’s degree in psychology; I earned a master’s and a doctorate in education from Jackson State University.

Recognizing the Crisis

There is a crisis in America today. It’s a crisis in education—a crisis that predominantly affects minorities. And perhaps the most affected subgroup is young African American males. This is my background: I was a Black boy growing up in one of the poorest counties in America, in a school district with such dismal performance that it was eventually taken over by federal authorities. Though I succeeded in pulling free of the mire, many of my classmates did not. Shortchanged by their education and left with scant prospects, they fell into a cycle of criminal activity, drug use, and jail time. From my time as a student and, later, as a teacher in the Mississippi public school system, I know firsthand the struggles, temptations, and apathy Black boys face. But I also know what it takes to turn a life around; I know what it means to watch a flower spring from the trampled ground.

One out of three Black men in America will be incarcerated in his lifetime, and more than a third of the prison population is Black (Knafo, 2013). But this unequal rate of discipline does not begin at adulthood: it has its roots in the schools. Federal data indicate that Black students account for 15.5 percent of the total K-12 population but make up 39 percent of those students who are suspended from school (Lombardo & Turner, 2018). Also, only 76 percent of African

Americans graduate from high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). It should be apparent that this crisis does not just affect the African American community: the enormous costs associated with retaining students, supporting dropouts who cannot find a job, and incarcerating colossal numbers of young men are borne by society at large.

This book aims to serve as both mirror and roadmap. I have identified eight issues that are most critical in the lives of young African American males: income inequality, anti-intellectualism, racial stereotypes, social promotion and retention, incarceration, inadequately trained teachers, ineffective assessments, and the lack of early childhood intervention. Subsequent chapters will begin by addressing those issues supported by statistics and stories culled both from my personal experience and from the experiences of others. The chapters present a general discussion of the topic and examine efforts to overcome the difficulties. Each chapter will close with a substantial section on solutions to the problems. The discussion concentrates on what works—the practical steps to move us from the current crisis to a future of parity and promise.

The Intersection of Poverty and Education

My understanding of the Black male crisis is intensely personal. In the following pages, I tell a few stories from my past that illustrate what life is like for the average Black male growing up in America.

At the elementary school I attended, most of the students came from families with incomes at or below the poverty line. Our neighborhoods provided us with few resources for learning and even fewer role models of educational and economic success. Because of this, we believed that no other way of life was possible for us. Furthermore, we were alienated by peers who enjoyed a higher economic status and who lived in better neighborhoods and had newer clothes, nicer TVs, computers—all the things we craved. Both the better-off students and the teachers expected us to exhibit behavioral problems and academic failure. Far too often, this expectation became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unfortunately, failing schools go hand in hand with life in poor neighborhoods. The schools I attended did not have the resources to compete with those in areas that had more money for books, computers, salaries, and so on. As a result, my schools had difficulty attracting well-trained teachers and administrators. The upshot was that many of my African American classmates were written off, ignored, or just passed from grade to grade without having done the required work. Many who did graduate were ill-prepared for college or the working world.

I saw a lot of my fellow Black male classmates limiting themselves. Instead of surrendering to the typical standards of a school environment they viewed as cruel and oppressive, they ended up rejecting European-American speech patterns and devaluing high academic achievement. They fell victim to anti-intellectualism and academic disengagement.

They were culturally conditioned to exacerbate a “cult of victimhood.” This phenomenon is all too common and leads many scholars to aim solutions for the Black male crisis at victimhood rather than recognizing that the problem of poor academic performance and academic disengagement is a product of poverty and cultural indoctrination.

However, some Black boys in my school, including me, responded oppositely. We used our awareness of racism and prejudice as motivation to do well, thus preparing ourselves to fight these evils.

Teachers: The Good and the Appalling

One of the most influential teachers I had was my high school biology teacher, Mrs. Minor. She was the wife of my former elementary school principal and mother of one of my classmates. Mrs. Minor approached her job as a teacher from the standpoint of love and caring. She recognized that, for many of us, her smile was the only one we would see at school each day. She wanted to be a beacon of hope, letting us know that our situations were only temporary.

Mrs. Minor did not care who your parents were or what you looked like; everyone had a fair shake with her. Because of this, many of us tried our best in her class. She had a deep and abiding love for the subject of biology, and her excitement was infectious. Even those of us who hated science loved biology after taking her class. She related the subject to our everyday lives and let us know why we needed to learn it.

Unfortunately, not every teacher was as caring, diligent, and capable as Mrs. Minor. My high school physics teacher, for example, did not know anything about physics. For an entire year, we would show up for class and do nothing. When it was time for him to be evaluated, he would have us go around the room and read aloud from our physics textbook. To my chagrin, he received an excellent evaluation.

But that was not even my worst experience. As a sophomore, I was slated to take chemistry. For the first month of the year, we had a reasonably capable teacher, though he lacked pedagogical and classroom-management skills. By the end of the first month, he had quit. For the rest of the semester, we had substitute teachers who knew nothing about teaching.

At the beginning of the second semester, we got a new teacher. She had a master's degree in chemistry but was not a licensed teacher. For the entire semester, she just let us do as we pleased and did not teach a single lesson. When it was time for her to be evaluated, she did what my physics teacher had done: she made us go around the room and read from our chemistry textbook. That was the only time we opened our book the entire year. She too received an excellent evaluation.

When I received my report card that summer, I was shocked to find out that I had received an F in chemistry. I was agitated! We had only completed a couple of assignments all year, and those were during the first month of school. I told my father, and he explained that I could retake it the next year. I tried to get him to go to the school to advocate for me, but he did not feel comfortable doing so. He asked my cousin's wife, who was an elementary school teacher in the school district, to accompany me to the school. Together, we explained the situation to an administrator who agreed to change my grade to a B. I was thankful that I did not have to repeat the class; however, I'm embarrassed to have a B in chemistry on my high school transcript, though I know nothing about the subject!

Though I didn’t decide to become a teacher until several years later, I remember thinking during these unfortunate high school experiences that something had to change. The students were getting cheated of an education, and thus a livelihood.

The Darker You Are, the Dumber You Are

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Southern Mississippi, I had the pleasure of taking a class taught by Dr. John Koeppel entitled “The History of Psychology.” He was a superb professor and encouraged his students to maximize their potential. For one of our class research papers, a classmate and I decided to study the subject of race and intelligence. We uncovered startling studies funded by racists and white supremacists concluding that race determined a person’s level of intelligence. According to these findings, European Americans were genetically predisposed to be intellectually superior while African Americans were intellectually inferior. Some of the studies and articles we found were shockingly offensive. One study that particularly horrified me concluded that the darker a person’s skin, the less intelligent he or she was.

During our presentation, I pointed out that, according to these studies, since I was the darkest person in the room, I was intellectually inferior to everyone else. However, I had one of the highest grade-point averages in my class. I also highlighted some studies conducted by African American psychologists that offered empirically based rebuttals, and their studies concluded that race does not determine a person’s cognitive abilities or level of functioning and that the previous studies had no scientific merit. That research paper was an eye-opener.

I subsequently devoured all the information I could on the subject of race, genetics, and intelligence. That research was a primary impetus for my decision to become a teacher and a basis for this book. I started telling my friends that when I graduated, I wanted to return to my hometown of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, to teach to ensure that African American children in the place where I grew up would not fall prey to stereotypes, self-fulfilling prophecies, and institutional racism.

When I graduated, I was true to my word: I took a teaching position in Hazlehurst. Hazlehurst had a system of de facto segregation that still exists: a public school for Blacks, a private school for whites. Determined to make a difference in the lives of minority children, I spent my free time studying and researching strategies for educating African American youth. By the time I began my first year as a teacher, I was ready for the challenge, even though at times I felt overwhelmed. By my second year, my colleagues frequently commented on how well behaved my students were. I owed a great deal of my success to believing that all youth, regardless of their background, could learn.

Those responsible for the U.S. educational system must recognize that the Black male is continuously bombarded with racial stereotypes and unfair assumptions that manifest themselves in the form of self-fulfilling prophecies. We see ourselves portrayed as drug-dealing buffoons with few redeeming qualities. When teachers, administrators, and parents encourage us to transcend our conditioning and let our actions speak louder than our words, many African American boys will do almost anything to live up to those high expectations.

Some White, Latino, Asian, and even Black teachers perpetuate theories of Black intellectual inferiority (consciously and subconsciously) by treating the Black boy as though he is incapable of academic success. Black boys don’t need to be treated differently than students from other races; however, it is essential for educators to recognize the cultural differences that exist among ethnic groups if African American students are to thrive academically.

Completing the Journey

After receiving my doctorate from Jackson State University, I took a position as an assistant professor of education at Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania. Moving from Mississippi to the East Coast was quite an adjustment, but I was up for the challenge. Later, I took a position at Langston University in Oklahoma. In August 2014, I moved to Virginia to take a position as dean of the Syphax School of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Virginia Union University. Things didn’t work out as I had hoped at Virginia Union, but that experience gave me the courage to venture out on my own and become an entrepreneur. During my time at Virginia Union, I became a first-time father. My son, Matthias Hank Warner Lynch was born on November 20, 2016, and his birth completely changed the way I look at the world. It also gave this book project added significance; in addition to fighting for every boy of color, I was also fighting for my own soul, resurrected through birth.

My educational journey from one of the most impoverished and intellectually downtrodden regions of the country to the halls of academia has taught me what it takes for a Black boy in America to surmount the obstacles in front of him. It has also taught me that I am one of the fortunate few. Many of my classmates fell by the wayside, victims to poverty, the drug trade, violence, an anti-intellectual culture, or a racist law enforcement system. In the following pages, I hope to highlight the problems facing the Black boy in education today and to provide clear steps that will lead us out of the crisis.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the education of the Black male in the United States. We look at the history of African American intellectual progress, from the beginnings of slavery, through the first educational efforts in the Northeast, to the spread of public schools following Emancipation, and finally to the post-segregation reality that is still playing out. In the final sections of the chapter, we focus on two structures that affect students today: No Child Left Behind and Common Core, with particular concern for how these entities affect the Black male student.

In Chapter 2, we examine the currently hot topic of income inequality as it affects the African American student. The income gap is increasing at an alarming rate in the United States. We look at how this affects Black families and poor neighborhoods. In America, school quality is deeply tied to the income of the community. We see how impoverishment impacts education, including what it means for teachers, school supplies, and parents. Solutions to the problems of income inequality will primarily have to take place at the political level, but we also look at targeted programs that can significantly reduce the equality gap. These include after-school programs, immersion programs, and programs that increase the involvement of low-income parents in their children's education.

In Chapter 3, we'll examine an issue we touched on earlier: anti-intellectualism. This is not an issue confined to the African American community; however, it has deep ramifications for African American boys. In the chapter, we look at four areas: sports, the entertainment industry, religion, and technology. None of these areas is problematic in and of itself. However, the monetization of American sports, entertainment, and religion has led some to a focus on these areas to the detriment of academic pursuits. Unfortunately, young Black boys are particularly susceptible to the allure. Technology presents even more significant challenges: young people today spend nearly eight hours a day interacting with screens, and most of this time is spent on non-educational pursuits. We look at some solutions to the problem of anti-intellectualism, including mentoring and structured screen time.

Chapter 4 delves into a problem that continues to plague African American boys: racial stereotyping. The American media has placed the Black boy in a box: he is an unruly, drug-using, violent character with little interest in education or advancing himself by legal means. What does this stereotyping do to the psyche of the African American boy? What happens when they internalize the image they are bombarded with? We'll look at the answers to these questions and at potential solutions to the crisis. We will examine solutions on three fronts: the political, where the government is putting in place a plan to tackle racial stereotyping; societal, which entails a massive educational outreach; and educational, which involves educating and empowering teachers.

Chapter 5 tackles an issue that is particularly problematic for the Black boy in America: social promotion and retention. African American boys are retained a grade in elementary school more often than members of other ethnic groups. They are also more likely to be promoted to the next grade without having acquired the necessary knowledge and skills. These two issues go hand in hand, leading to the dropout crisis among African American youth in this country. This chapter looks at the history of social promotion and retention and the psychological effects each of these has on the Black male in America. Solutions to the problems of social promotion and retention include multiage classrooms, integrated tracking, and a broadening of the definition of "intelligence" in line with Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

Chapter 6 takes an in-depth look at the so-called school-to-prison pipeline. African American boys and youth are at higher risk for getting in trouble with the law and for incarceration than other groups. We look at the statistics, both national and regional, and then at the causes of this crisis, which has its roots in the schools. Black boys tend to receive unequal punishment in the classroom. More and more often, children in lower grades are being placed in handcuffs. Routine classroom behavioral issues are often dealt with by summoning a law enforcement officer, and zero-tolerance policies have exacerbated the problems. We then turn to the failure to deal with students with learning disabilities, and the inability to recognize the impact of home life on classroom behavior. Finally, we look at the ways out of this crisis, which include early intervention, in-school mediation structures, and fixing a for-profit justice system. At the core of education is the teacher. As we saw earlier, the teachers in an impoverished community like the one in which I grew up can lack both the knowledge and the skills to impart even a rudimentary education.

In Chapter 7, we examine the current situation in America, including inadequately trained teachers, a shortage of qualified teachers in the areas where they are most needed, and a lack of teacher support. One obvious solution is adequate pay; teachers should be compensated for doing some of the most laborious work in the land. Support structures must also be broadened and solidified. Finally, it is imperative that schools and teachers be part of a national network that offers access to crucial information and provides feedback in difficult situations. A corollary to the above is a lack of effective assessments. Poorly trained teachers are not able to adequately ascertain the educational level of their students, which leads to misrepresentation as well as social promotion and retention. This is exacerbated by the "testing culture" currently gripping the United States educational system.

Chapter 8 delves into the background of the testing culture and how it affects students. Many Black boys are not being provided with foundational skills because teachers are "teaching to the test," often with their livelihoods on the line. This faulty foundation has a snowball effect, leading to problems with motivation and inevitably causing students to drop out. Solutions to the problems of ineffective assessments include early intervention and the implementation of varied assessments over a more extended period.

Chapter 9 examines the issue of early childhood intervention. More and more studies indicate that the earlier educational services can intervene, the better a child will do in school. This is particularly true for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, which includes many African American boys. We'll go through the supports already available, including the diagnostic tools that educational facilities have on hand. We'll also look at several solutions to the problem of inadequate early intervention.

In Chapter 10, we'll look back at the eight primary obstacles facing the Black boy in education, but we'll also be looking ahead to the future. We will examine practical steps that could pull America out of the educational crisis it faces. These steps must take place at every level: familial, scholastic, societal, and governmental.

Can the crisis in educating the Black boy in America be solved? Yes, it can: I am living proof. However, it's going to take more than platitudes, more than speeches by politicians, and more than one or two outstanding teachers . . . it's going to take an entire culture deciding that it's time to do something. So, let's roll up our sleeves and plunge in. We have work to do.

Chapter 1: Educating Black Boys in America

A Grim Beginning

In 1619, at the site ironically named Point Comfort, Virginia, “twenty and odd” Africans were taken off an English warship, *The White Lion*, and exchanged for food. Most of their names have long been forgotten. What we do know is that the Africans were probably from what is now Angola, on the southwest coast of Africa. They were in transit to Mexico on the Portuguese *São João Bautista* when that ship was boarded by the English who carried them to Virginia (McCartney, 2011).

That disembarkation represented the first footstep on the grimmest odyssey in the annals of the United States. Over the next two and a half centuries, until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, the number of African American slaves on American soil would swell to nearly 4 million. In total, more than 12 million Africans were captured and ferried across the Atlantic, though at least 10 percent died on the dreaded Middle Passage (McCartney, 2011). Of those 12 million, less than half a million were transported directly to the fledgling United States, but the numbers of people of African descent burgeoned over time. According to the U.S. Census in 2017, there were 43,659,853 people with African ancestry in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

The chilling realities of slavery in the U.S. have been explored in depth in various media; here, it will suffice to note that, for the first time in history, a deliberate wholesale disenfranchisement of a people took place. Africans were stripped of their homes, names, languages, cultures, and dignity. They were physically and emotionally abused and denigrated, and their “subhuman” status was codified in the new laws of the country.

Sadly, the struggles of African Americans to achieve equal status did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation. Though there was an initial period of euphoria, which led to Blacks taking political leadership positions (I examined these personages in my two-volume *Before Obama: A Reappraisal of Black Reconstruction Era Politicians*), the advances were soon erased by the Jim Crow laws. It was not until Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others ushered in the Civil Rights Era in the 1960s that nominal equality was achieved. In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Dimino, Smith, & Solimine, 2010). For the first time in the history of the United States, segregation on racial grounds became illegal.

However, though the law of the land mandated equality, African Americans had been disenfranchised for so long that a de facto inequality existed. Because African Americans lived in more impoverished neighborhoods and did not have access to the same jobs and opportunities as their White counterparts, they found it extraordinarily difficult to pull themselves out of their impoverished existence. This remains true to this day. As we will see in Chapter 2, income inequality is a key factor hampering the progress of Black youth in this country.

This background is intended neither as an excuse nor as a complaint. Rather, it is presented as a reminder that there is a historical reason for the present crisis in educating young Black men. We must recognize that just half a century has passed since the last laws governing inequality were removed and that we are still reaping the bitter fruit of nearly four centuries of profound injustice.

The Quest for a Chance to Learn

Though African Americans have achieved stunning gains—exemplified by the election in 2008 of Barack Obama to the highest office in the land—our progress remains stymied by endemic racism, political barriers, and a legal and policing system still heavily biased against African Americans. In this chapter, we will look at one of the most crucial strands of the African American struggle for freedom: the quest for education, which was initially merely a quest to learn to read.

The White masters early on recognized the dangers of allowing slaves to read; in fact, in many parts of the South, the punishment for learning to read was the severing of a finger (National Public Radio [NPR], 2013). Similarly, anyone caught teaching a slave to read was fined or whipped (Jackson, 2009). Nevertheless, many slaves did learn to read. Some of these were taught by compassionate Whites, especially those who were intent on Christianizing slaves. Others learned on their own.

Perhaps the most famous example of a slave who learned to read was Frederick Douglass who asked his mistress to teach him. She obliged in a spirit of entertainment, teaching him the alphabet, but as soon as she realized he was learning to read sentences, and then books, she panicked and tried to stop him. As he writes in his autobiography: "But this was too late: the first and never-to-be-retraced step had been taken. Teaching me the alphabet had been the 'inch' given, I was now waiting only for the opportunity to 'take the ell'" (Douglass, 1966). Douglass (1966), of course, escaped from slavery to become a famous orator and author, a monumental figure in the march toward abolition.

Early Educational Efforts

In the North, escaped slaves and free Blacks were instructed in reading by various sympathetic individuals and groups. Notable among these was a Philadelphia Quaker, Anthony Benezet, who began tutoring Black boys in his home in the mid-1700s. It was immediately apparent to him that, given a genuine opportunity to learn, African Americans were intellectually equal to Whites (this was not commonly assumed at the time, even among sympathetic Northern Whites). Prominent African American personalities James Forten, Richard Allen, and Absalom Jones all received their education in Benezet's house. However, Benezet's most influential role was in converting the luminaries of the day, including Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, and Benjamin Rush. He was able to convince these figures that "Black inferiority" arose not from any innate attributes, but from the institution of slavery itself. Benezet's tutoring sessions became the Raspberry Street Schools, which were a Philadelphia institution for more than a century (Jackson, 2009).

Following Benezet's and others' pioneering efforts, schools and institutes devoted to educating Blacks cropped up across the North, many of them created by the American Missionary Association. However, it is important to note that, even as Black boys were beginning to make inroads in education, Black girls were given short shrift: women of all races were still treated as inferior to men in U.S. society.

Following Emancipation, the Freedmen's Bureau, a governmental agency set up in 1865 to help Blacks assimilate, started promoting and fostering education for Blacks. Under its aegis and until the Bureau was disbanded in 1872, over a thousand schools were established across the South. The teachers included some free Blacks (about half were Black men), and some Northern Whites, who were mostly women. At the time, public education was opposed by many Southern Whites; the establishment and funding of schools for Blacks by the Freedmen's Bureau tilted the balance in favor of public education, and this led to widespread publicly funded schools by the early 1900s. Though there were some integrated schools at this time (notably in New Orleans), most public schools were segregated (Pierce, 1904).

The Jim Crow laws and White violence against Black schools and teachers took an inevitable toll on schools for African Americans, which were generally underfunded, understaffed, and in disrepair. However, a substantial number of Black men completed their education and attended the fledgling Black colleges: Howard, Fisk, Hampton Institute, Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers (later known as Tuskegee Institute), and others, including the parent institutions of Virginia Union, where I formerly held a deanship.

Washington and Du Bois

Two figures loom large over the early stages of African American education: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Washington, who was born into slavery in 1856, became the leader of the above-mentioned Tuskegee Institute. He advocated for accommodation and encouraged Blacks to bolster themselves through educational and business opportunities, rather than by defying the Jim Crow laws that were taking effect at the time. Though his public statements were somewhat at odds with his intentions (he secretly funded court challenges to segregation, for example), he was seen by some in the African American community as too feeble in confronting the racist apparatus. As an educator, Washington promoted what would now be viewed as a vocational-school model; he wanted Blacks to study "useful" topics such as agricultural and mechanical skills.

W. E. B. Du Bois was one of those who felt Washington was selling his people short by compromising with the Southern political establishment. Du Bois was raised in the North, in a Massachusetts community that enjoyed relative equality, and he was incensed by what was happening in other parts of the country. Du Bois was an extraordinary writer, and his 1903 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, had an electrifying effect on his African American readership (Du Bois, 1903). He later became heavily involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and his editorship of the NAACP's monthly magazine, *The Crisis*, gave him a platform to disseminate his ideas.

Du Bois disagreed fundamentally and publicly with Booker T. Washington on education (though he later expressed regret for his vocal criticism). While Washington favored a vocational-school model, Du Bois desired nothing less than the full complement of classes in the classics, arts, and humanities that upper-level White schools enjoyed at the time (Provenzo, 2002). In this, he followed the progressive educational thinking of John Dewey and others. Du Bois wrote:

> Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that higher education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life. (Du Bois, 1903)

Du Bois's cultivation and championing of a Black elite, which he termed the "talented tenth," had long-lasting implications for Black society. On the one hand, it highlighted the intellectual achievements of university professors and the indelible creative output of the

Harlem Renaissance; on the other, it failed to fully recognize that the majority of African Americans were still floundering within an inadequate and unequal educational system. As we shall see in Chapter 2, this partition still lingers within the African American community and continues to have a dampening effect on the ability to engage Black boys in education.

Du Bois, counter to conventional wisdom at the time, insisted that the Reconstruction Era was not a failure (a notion furthered in my *Before Obama* books). One of the favorable areas he highlighted was the opening of public schools, which created a small but growing stratum of educated Black men.

Dismantling "Separate but Equal"

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), the watermark Supreme Court decision cementing segregation in U.S. law, ushered in a new era of "separate but equal," which in practice was anything but. The half-century between *Plessy* and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which abolished segregation in schools, was coincidentally a time of dramatic expansion in U.S. public education. This fact should not go unnoticed: Even as educational services in the United States were taking enormous strides, leading to what we now consider the norm of decent, high-functioning public schools, African Americans were by law being cheated of full participation.

In 1910, just 9 percent of 18-year-olds in the U.S. graduated from high school; by 1940, 50 percent of young adults had earned a high school diploma, an unprecedented number, which far exceeded even the achievements in Europe at the time. However, this rise was not shared equally. The numbers of African Americans who graduated from high school remained extremely low even as the figures soared for Whites (Goldin & Katz, 2008). Nevertheless, school-enrollment rates were increasing for Blacks, and the difference in enrollment rates between Blacks and Whites shrank from 23 percent in 1900 to 7 percent in 1940. Compare this with the 93 percent enrollment rate for all comers—Blacks and Whites, boys and girls—in 1991. As we will see, however, graduation rates have not come close to achieving the same parity (National Assessment of Adult Literacy [NAAL], n.d.).

The legal and emotional impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* cannot be overstated. The NAACP, in which Du Bois had played such a vital role, sponsored the case, as it had other civil rights cases around the country. The plaintiff, Oliver Brown, was an African American man in Kansas whose daughter had to go to a Blacks-only school a mile and a half from her home though there was a Whites-only school just a few blocks away. However, *Brown* was not the only case heard before the Supreme Court: four other cases were bundled into the hearing, which was viewed by the country, and indeed the world, as pivotal. The plaintiffs' counsel before the court was the storied Thurgood Marshall, later to become a Supreme Court justice. Following astute behind-the-scenes manipulation and cajoling by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the justices delivered a surprise unanimous decision outlawing segregation.

The legal edifice had been toppled, but dismantling the apparatus of racism proved long and arduous. The process of desegregating schools was fraught with tension, exemplified by trials of the "Little Rock Nine." This was a group of Black students admitted to Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas, following the *Brown* ruling. In the face of fierce opposition from the local White community, the students entered the school in the fall of 1957, protected by the 101st Airborne Division, which had been mobilized by President Eisenhower. The chaotic scenes, which were broadcast on television, captured the imagination of the country.

The first years for Black students at the Central High proved extraordinarily difficult as was true for Black students attending White-majority schools across the South. The standards were higher at the White-majority school, and the Black students faced daily abuse and ridicule. However, they persevered. Ernest Green, the first African American student to graduate from Central High, went on to serve as Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs under Jimmy Carter and received the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1999.

Though *Brown v. Board of Education* is rightly cited as a watershed moment in the African American struggle for equality, it took many years and more lawsuits, before school integration became the norm. However, even then the struggle for equality was far from over.

Unequal Districting

A key issue, one that remains pertinent today in many areas of the country, is unequal districting in which districts are gerrymandered to create majority-White or majority-Black populations. The courts have seesawed on the issue: *Shaw v. Hunt*, in 1993, found that North Carolina had violated the laws by using racial considerations to redraw district lines; however, *Hunt v. Cromartie* reversed that decision in 1999. It is likely that the issue will continue to be batted back and forth between state and federal courts for some time before it is settled (Dimino et al., 2010).

School districts are redrawn every 10 years in most parts of the United States. The redistricting is often contentious, as those in power seek to create districts that shunt money to their own. That action tends to consolidate certain groups. The lower socioeconomic classes and minorities are often squeezed into awkwardly shaped districts that do not have the funding to offer adequate educational experiences. Though court challenges are common, this issue remains a core reason for the disenfranchisement of African American boys.

The Drug Wars

Even as the legal obstacles were crumbling in the 1960s, societal factors hampering the progress of the African American male were on the rise. Prominent among these was the surge in illegal drug use. The celebration of drug use among the countercultural movements of the 1960s was one reason for the surge; another was the Vietnam War (1955–1975), which created a dependency on heroin and other drugs among many males. Half of the enlisted men claimed to have tried heroin and opium while in Vietnam, and fully a third continued using the drugs after their return (Robins, Davis, & Goodwin, 1974). Black men were more greatly represented in the U.S. Army than in the population as a whole (one in seven combatants in Vietnam was Black), and they brought their addictions back to their home communities (Chambers & Anderson, 1999). As the veterans brought their drug habits, exacerbated by PTSD and other factors, back to America, they created a demand for illegal drugs. This demand was commonly met by people in the socioeconomically deprived sector of the population, who seized on the opportunity to make quick, easy money. Also, pushers preyed on poor communities, getting them addicted to free or cheap highs before raising the prices. The rapid spread of drug use as well as the disastrous "war on drugs" initiated by President Nixon and furthered by subsequent presidents, devastated impoverished communities and decimated inner cities.

Testing and Promotion

The current hot-button issue of testing is yet another factor that has created racially tiered classrooms since the 1960s. School leaders engaged in the systematic use of intelligence tests to determine the placement of children into high-, medium-, or low-ability groups. The children then entered homogeneous classrooms, ostensibly based on their ability. School leaders insisted that this was a democratic way to proceed with schooling and that each child would be able to work up to his or her capability. The use of tests to determine innate ability, it was claimed, would aid educators with vocational guidance, provide an avenue for identifying unusually capable (as well as “retarded” students), and help diagnose learning problems (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

In 1967, *Hobson v. Hansen* determined that a standardized test unjustly favored White students. The court found that “because the test was standardized to a White, middle-class group, it was inappropriate to use for tracking decisions.” Despite other similar court cases and despite the growing evidence of inequality, testing became the norm over the next decades and led to tracking, and to a culture of social promotion and retention. Tracking is the process of grouping students according to their academic ability for subjects or classes within a school setting.

Eventually, these factors led to the separation of children by social class, with many children who lived in poverty receiving placements in the lower achievement groups. Because of their lower socioeconomic status, Black boys were heavily represented in these achievement groups. Studies labeled children from various racial and ethnic groups innately deficient, based on their performance on intelligence tests. People ostensibly committed to managing the veracity of test results ignored social inequities and how they likely contributed to test bias based on differences in social class and the oppression experienced by racial and ethnic groups (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

School leaders believed they had found a solution to issues that threatened to disrupt the age-grade schooling process, albeit one that resulted in equating school failure with mental deficiency. The ability to promote children unable to pass exams geared toward “normal” children would alleviate the horrendous failure rate and the costly and disruptive crowding of students at the lower grades. Educators did not consider the long-term implications of this strategy, however, and they simply grouped the “abnormal” students informally. These students were allowed to move through the school system with a consistently substandard education offered to them, without an active effort to teach materials in such a way as might engage them. We now recognize that many of these students were atypical learners who had behavioral or cognitive needs.

Despite the criticisms and problems with social promotion, the practice remained common through the 1970s, and many schools still use it today (Frey, 2005). African Americans began to demand that schools stop labeling children as “defective,” advocating for the better adaption of schools and the education system as a whole to meet the learning needs of children (Tyack & Cuban 1995). By the 1980s, the practice of homogeneous grouping and the associated practice of tracking were also under fire, with the criticism that not only did ability grouping reflect class- and race-based inequalities, but that such practices perpetuated them (Oakes, 2005).

In 1983, the report of Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, caught the attention of the American public. The report was largely pessimistic, suggesting that American education was watered down and not up to the standards of the rest of the developed world. By the mid-1980s, in line with the report's recommendations, most Americans believed that promotion should be based on students' mastery of grade-appropriate content and knowledge. By 1998, the Clinton administration was overtly calling for the end to social promotion (Frey, 2005). In the era of No Child Left Behind that followed, many states passed legislation that explicitly prohibited promotion of children who did not reach specific levels of performance on state-mandated assessments.

No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act

The very name of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act suggests that the writers recognized the crisis among the lower socioeconomic classes. The act was created with the best intentions, as a follow-on from Lyndon B. Johnson's Title I, which offered support to disadvantaged students. The act's sponsors included luminaries from both sides of the political spectrum, among them John Boehner and Ted Kennedy (Klein, 2015).

The essential tenets of the act were that schools and teachers needed to be held accountable for improvements. The tool they offered was blanket testing: all students in grades three through eight would be tested at intervals, and those in high school would be tested once. The goal was to achieve "Adequate Yearly Progress" (though this varied from state to state). There were serious ramifications for schools and states that failed to achieve AYP. From *Education Week*:

- A school that misses AYP two years in a row has to allow students to transfer to a better-performing public school in the same district.
- If a school misses AYP for three years in a row, it must offer free tutoring.

- Schools that continue to miss achievement targets could face state intervention. States can choose to shut these schools down, turn them into charter schools, take them over, or use another significant turnaround strategy.
- Schools that don’t make AYP have to set aside a portion of their federal Title I dollars for tutoring and school choice (Klein, 2015).

Schools that failed to achieve a certain level on the administered tests were placed on probation, and teachers’ and administrators’ jobs were at stake. Furthermore, teachers were required to be “highly qualified,” which led to confusion and some rancor.

As might have been predicted, with so much money on the line, schools and teachers began teaching to the test, allowing other academic areas to fall by the wayside. And there were numerous cases in which teachers and even administrators tampered with scores and took the tests on behalf of students; after all, their livelihoods were at stake.

Academics generally agree that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) failed in its objectives. The lowest-performing students were just not meeting the educational goals. Black boys were still being left behind, and the line of educational progress had not inclined significantly upward. By 2014, more than 40 states were granted waivers by the Obama administration; they could forego the NCLB strictures if they agreed to adhere to certain looser directives on educational redesign.

At the end of December 2015, President Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, effectively sweeping away NCLB. This bipartisan measure reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is dedicated to providing equal opportunity to all students, including Black boys (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], n.d.). The new bill made long-needed significant changes to federal education policy. This was a breath of fresh air for many educators, as it was clear that the goals of NCLB were only attainable in a utopian society.

Here are some highlights from ESSA:

1. One thing that changed with the ESSA was how teacher performance is evaluated. States can individually appraise how well their teachers are doing in terms of performance. This means no more federal meddling on issues of teacher quality.
2. Another alteration under ESSA allows states "to come up with their way to determine the quality of their local schools." This means that test scores are no longer the sole deciding factor for school performance. I think this is a good idea, as states are better equipped to assess the performance of their K-12 institutions. The federal government tried to do it their way and failed miserably. They just underestimated the complexity of the task.
3. ESSA lists music as a component of a well-rounded education and gives it more support than previous policies when it comes to access and funding. The law also means federal grant funding is available for states and local school districts to support music education programs and further train music teachers.
4. The law also scores a win for education equity by reauthorizing critical protections of vulnerable and marginalized populations. It also furthers education equity by supporting and growing local innovations—including evidence-based programs and interventions developed by local organizations.
5. ESSA continues the nation's investment in early childhood education by increasing access to quality preschool (USDOE, n.d.).

Will Black boys fare any better under ESSA? Only time will tell, but it’s a step in the right direction.

Common Core State Standards

This initiative has its roots in the 1990s when states began creating academic standards for their schools. Governors from various states banded together to create Achieve, Inc., an organization devoted to the creation and adoption of viable standards.

By 2009, a set of common standards had been written and agreed upon, with the purpose being to “provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them.” By October 2018, 41 states had decided to adopt the Common Core standards, which offer direction on what students should know in the key areas of math and literacy. A corollary set of standards, the Next Generation Science Standards, was developed for the sciences.

Though the Common Core has been on the receiving end of vitriol, primarily from Republican governors, and several states have withdrawn from the standards, the jury is still out on whether the standards are working. The consensus seems to be that, as with many educational efforts, the top-performing students will continue to get better. However, the Common Core introduces new, more difficult concepts at an earlier age, particularly in math. Low-performing Black boys who have not yet grasped the base concepts will not have the foundation to build upon. The result will likely be, as so often in the past, a rash of dropouts who simply do not have the background to do the required work.

Donald Trump's War Against the Black Male Athlete

On August 26, 2016, then-San Francisco 49ers' quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat during the pre-game National Anthem (KXTV Staff, 2017). A photo was tweeted, and a massive debate ensued. Kaepernick addressed the media two days later, explaining,

> I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. (Wyche, 2016, para. 3)

The quarterback's assertion that he was making a statement about racial inequality and police brutality did nothing to calm the controversy, with many believing Kaepernick was disrespecting U.S. war veterans. Throughout September and for the remainder of the season, other NFL players joined Kaepernick. Players kneeled, sat, linked arms, or raised fists to symbolize their support of the protest.

In March 2017, Kaepernick opted out of his contract with the 49ers, becoming a free agent. He has yet to be picked up by another team, with many alleging his protests are the reason. President Donald Trump tweeted, "NFL owners don't want to pick [Kaepernick] up because they don't want to get a nasty tweet from Donald Trump."

President Trump added more fuel to the fire during a September speech in Alabama, commenting, "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a b**ch off the field right now. Out! He's fired. He's fired!" (Stetler, 2017, para. 10.).

In response, many more NFL players joined the protest (Stites, 2017). Entire teams kneeled, sat, or linked arms. Some players wore T-shirts in support of Kaepernick, raised fists after scoring touchdowns, or continued warming up during the anthem. The Steelers, Seahawks, and Titans remained in the locker room for the duration of the anthem. Even team owners and those who sang the anthem joined in on the protests.

Black Athletes as a Political Diversion

The most peculiar part of this story was President Donald Trump's "wag the dog" reaction to the protests. It seems that he renews his dubious war against Black athletes every time he needs to distract the country away from his latest scandal. Nothing mobilizes his base more than the degradation of the Black male athlete. Trump deftly capitalizes on the complicated mix of love and resentment that many White citizens feel for wealthy, Black athletes, who have taken over their favorite sports. Although we rarely talk about it, this dynamic has been around for a while.

Trump could not resist cracking the whip on the plantation named professional football. Trump, who was once a pro-football owner himself, understands the White male belief that African American athletes exist merely to entertain them, and should never be humanized or allowed to access equity fully (Terris, 2015). In their minds, the Black players are the horses, and the White players and coaches are the jockeys. Like the horse, the voice of the Black athlete is never to be heard. On the other sign of the coin, Black athletes know that they are disposable and easily replaceable. Adding to their maladies is the lack of guaranteed contracts, and White billionaire owners, many of who contributed to Trump's campaign.

Black Boys as Collateral Damage

In reaction to the media storm, student-athletes of all races, some as young as 3 years old, stood in solidarity with Colin, and other athletes of color. They understood that Trump's war on

Black athletes was also a war against democracy. For Black boys who aspire to play professional sports one day, Trump was attacking their current idols and future brotherhood. In reaction to these student-athlete protests, school districts all over the country lowered the boom, and suspended protesting athletes, as though they were committing grand larceny. As expected, young Black males received the harshest punishments, just for exercising their constitutional right to protest.

Black boys, athletes or not, learn early on that fair and just treatment under the law is not meant for them. No matter how many yards they rush for or how many degrees they obtain, their Black skin will always make them a threat to the White establishment. They make peace with this surety early on in life. In the end, Black boys are the collateral damage of the anthem protests, having their worst fears reinforced by a president that is not fit for office.

Historical Incarceration

Black men are imprisoned at a higher rate than Whites, and this phenomenon is in fact at a historic high. As a recent Pew Research Center study indicates, the gap between the numbers of Blacks and Whites in prison has widened by an alarming amount since 1963 when Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. In 1963, Black men were five times as likely as White men to be in prison; by 2010, that figure had increased to more than six times as likely (Drake, 2013). According to the NAACP’s criminal justice worksheet, “If current trends continue, one in three Black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime” (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, [NAACP], n.d.), a ratio that is already true for impoverished and urban areas.

Furthermore, Black youth are being incarcerated at extremely high levels: 28 percent of juvenile arrests were of Blacks, though they comprise just 12 percent of the youth population (The Sentencing Project, 2013). These alarming statistics have their roots in several factors, including the aforementioned drug wars; a knock-on effect from having fathers in prison; a culture of anti-intellectualism, which makes it “cool” and a rite of passage to spend time in prison; and endemic racism and targeting by police officers. We will examine these factors more in more depth in Chapter 2.

Seedlings Among the Ruins

Given the dire history outlined above and the current difficulties faced by the African American population, it would be easy to assume that educating Black boys is a lost cause. This is demonstrably not the case. If one looks purely at the statistics surrounding young African American males in education, the progress is inexorably upward. Dropout rates have been steadily decreasing (Schools Matter, 2015).

Despite the tremendous obstacles facing the Black male student, his spirit remains unquenched: he will continue to strive for the best and is making headway in the face of almost inconceivable historical injustices. To borrow the words of Frederick Douglass, he has been given the inch; he will now “take the ell.” Though we are still in crisis, there is a visible path out of the morass. In the next chapters, we will examine in detail the primary obstacles that continue to stand in the way of young African Americans in education and will look at concrete, actionable ways to tear those down, paving the way for a future of parity and promise.

Chapter 2: Income Inequality (Obstacle 1)

At night the rats would run along the top of the couch where he slept, and he'd be so scared he couldn't sleep (Mann, 2013). The boy was crying as he said this, telling his teacher why he was always so tired in class, why he sometimes fell asleep, and why he hadn't done his homework. He had recently moved into the school district. His parents had divorced, and his mother had custody of him and his sister. They were staying with his mom's relatives in a rundown house in a poor neighborhood, and he couldn't find anyone to help him do his homework.

The boy was well-behaved and charming, but as the year progressed, the teacher noticed that he was falling behind academically and seemed lethargic. So, she spoke to him privately one day, and that's when she gathered his story. Alarmed, the teacher called the boy's mother in for a joint conference. The mother began to weep in front of her son, saying that she worked nights and was simply not able to make ends meet. She felt terrible that she wasn't able to help her children, but couldn't see a way out of the hole she was in.

The teacher, who was also a single mother, sent the boy back to class and told the mother that she needed to get back in control. She offered the mother advice on managing her time, told her to find a pastor who could help her and wrote down concrete steps that she could take at home to help her children.

The mother followed the teacher's advice. She spoke to a pastor who helped her find a daytime job. At that job, she was able to save up for a down payment on a small apartment. She started spending time with her son in the evenings, helping him get caught up on his homework. And it worked: the boy passed second grade and went on to become a successful student (Mann, 2013).

The Statistics of Poverty

A startling number of Black Americans live in poverty. These are members of families that have an annual income at or below the federal poverty level, which is adjusted annually to account for inflation and price changes. The poverty level is the income that economic research suggests is needed to meet basic needs. As of 2018, the federal poverty level for a family of four was $25,100 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation [ASPE], 2018). African American families, and especially African American children live in poverty at significantly greater numbers than other Americans. According to the U.S. Census, 26 percent of all African Americans live below the poverty line, compared to 15 percent for all Americans. This figure increases to 33 percent for Black children (DeNavas & Proctor, 2015).

In America today, the federal poverty level does not provide enough income for a family to do more than survive. Therefore, it is perhaps a more accurate representation of the income inequality in America to also consider those who qualify as low-income. Individuals are considered low-income if they earn less than two times the federal poverty levels (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013). The federally established levels are good baselines for comparison, but it is important to remember that the cost of living varies based on location and region. Urban areas are, on average, more expensive for families than in rural areas (Addy et al., 2013). Even though urban areas require higher income for families to survive, rural areas (which include much of the Southern and Western United States) have the highest rates of children living in low-income families (Rothschild, 2016).

Regardless of geographic location, children under the age of six make up a disproportionally large percentage of low-income individuals. Not surprisingly, African

Americans comprise a majority of this group. Sixty-five percent of all Black children under the age of six live in low-income families, compared to only 31 percent of White children (Addy et al., 2013).

Race is not the only factor that contributes to African American children living in poverty. Family structure also plays a significant role. Families with two adults have more opportunities for income and therefore avoiding poverty, but unfortunately, this is not the reality for a large percentage of Black children. Single mothers are raising over half the Black children in the U.S., and 39 percent of these single-parent households live in poverty (DeNavas & Proctor, 2015). Despite some positive trends in the early 2000s, these rates have hovered between 40 and 50 percent for the better part of a century (DeNavas & Proctor, 2015).

Affordable Housing and Low-Income Families

As we saw in the story at the beginning of this chapter, the effects of being raised in poverty or a low-income family can be staggering. Household income affects children's physical, mental, and emotional health on a daily basis. Children in low-income environments often have more stress and health issues than their higher-income counterparts. These hardships contribute to educational deficits that begin when the children are young and continue through high school and even college. The effects of poverty on African American children are complex and difficult to address individually, but their causes are more easily outlined. Many of these negative effects stem from one root: a lack of safe and affordable housing.

Housing is a major expense for American families, especially those that live in poverty. Twenty-five percent of low-income families spend over two-thirds of their salaries on rent and utility bills (Edelman, 2016). For many families, salaries are not guaranteed. Of children who are classified as low-income, 75 percent live in families where at least one parent works part-time or for just part of the year (Addy et al., 2013). Furthermore, despite the stereotypes on television and disparaging political ads, most low-income families do not receive any public housing or housing assistance. In fact, of all the families that would qualify for assistance, only a quarter receive any aid (Edelman, 2016). When high prices are coupled with a lack of job security, the result is increased mobility due to rent changes and eviction for low-income Black children. Not surprisingly, the subgroup most at risk is African American women (Edelman, 2016).

Being forced continuously to uproot has a negative impact on African American students' performance in school. Studies have shown that students who move frequently have lower achievement in school than students who do not. Furthermore, children who attend high-poverty schools throughout their educational career are more likely to drop out of high school (Carter, 2013).

In addition to forcing families into frequent moves, the lack of affordable housing in America contributes to health hazards for low-income families. Detroit, Michigan, is a perfect example of this issue. Detroit has extremely high levels of poverty and a large high population of African Americans. In some areas, around half the residents live below the poverty line. The houses in these areas are mostly old and contain lead paint and piping, leading to greater risk of lead toxicity (Roelofs, 2016). Lead is especially dangerous for young children, and high levels of lead in the body can lead to delayed brain development, nervous-system issues, a decrease in school achievement, and even a reduction in IQ. Since the cost of removing lead paint from homes is prohibitive—approximately $10,000 per home—many municipalities are unwilling or unable to make the improvements, leaving low-income families with no choice but to continue living in unsafe environments even if they are aware of the risks.

Income Disparity in Public Schools

In the United States, the majority of public schools are neighborhood schools. Schools, like neighborhoods, are for the most part separated according to social class. For low-income African American children, the consequences are inferior schools and lack of access to high-quality education.

Before students even enter the public school system, low-income students are at a disadvantage. Low-income students are less likely than their wealthier peers to have access to high-quality preschool or pre-K programs, and they often have fewer opportunities for literacy development. Many low-income parents have jobs that require them to work at night and on weekends, so they are not as available for play-based education (Rothschild, 2016).

Many researchers highlight the “word gap” as a symptom of the disparity in early childhood education between low-income and higher-income children. According to a study out of the University of Kansas, children whose parents have professional, degree-requiring careers hear as many as 45 million words by the time they are four years old. Children whose parents are on welfare, conversely, may only hear 13 million words (Rothschild, 2016). Over the years, celebrities and politicians from President Obama to Hillary Clinton to *Sesame Street*’s Elmo have heralded the need for closing the word gap. Unfortunately, the challenges facing low-income African American children can’t be solved by simply introducing them to a greater variety of words before kindergarten.

Once students enter the public school system, their location will likely determine the wealth of their school. For students who live in the Southern United States, schools are most likely to be low-income if they live in rural areas. Students who live in the Northeast or Midwest are more likely to attend low-income schools if they live in large urban areas (Jordan, 2015).

Race is a significant indicator of the likelihood a student will attend a low-income school. Nearly half of Black students in this country attend schools with high rates of poverty. Black students are about six times more likely to attend a low-income school than White students, regardless of their socioeconomic status (Jordan, 2015). In some geographic areas, the ratios are so pronounced that schools are essentially segregated between low-income Black schools and higher-income White schools. For example, in Cook County, Illinois, where Chicago is located, less than 10 percent of White students attend low-income schools, while 75 percent of Black students do (Jordan, 2015).

In addition to the numerous problems associated with segregated schools, low-income schools do not provide the same educational opportunities for children. These schools tend to offer fewer extracurricular sports and academic opportunities, hire less-experienced teachers, and have larger class sizes (Jordan, 2015).

The federal government recognizes that schools with high populations of low-income students often need additional resources to offer quality education. The remedy comes in the form of Title I funds. These funds are designed to supplement local allocations to provide the additional resources, staff, and services to low-income schools. However, there are loopholes in the oversight of local spending that undercut the equality efforts of Title 1. As the effectiveness of the teacher is the most important element in a child's success, the consequences of misallocation can be dire.

Poverty and Higher Education

The consequences of inferior education do not stop with high school. Children who grow up in low-income families, particularly African American children, tend to struggle in higher education. Around a third of low-income students who enroll at a four-year college must take at least one remedial course, meaning they are unprepared for college-level academics. And, unfortunately, 89 percent of low-income first-generation college students do not graduate within six years. They are also more than four times as likely as other college students to drop out in the first year of college (Carter, 2013).

What do all these statistics mean? What do family structure, affordable housing, early childhood education, and low-income schools mean for African American children in this country, and particularly for African American boys? We will look at some of the ramifications in the next section.

What Does the Growing Income Gap Mean for Young African American Boys?

As we have seen, more African American families than ever are living in poverty or low-income situations. More Black children are living in single-parent households, usually with their mother in communities where there are fewer opportunities for economic advancement. The statistics are staggering, and they are not improving. For African American boys, the growing income gap between families living in poverty and the highest economic sector means fewer opportunities than ever before.

Lack of Educational Opportunities

The lack of educational opportunities for African American boys begins in early childhood. It is not the result of uninterested parents; in fact, the opposite is true. Today, middle-class and affluent parents are spending more money on books, toys, trips, experiences, and schools for their children. They have recognized that in today's increasingly competitive global market, their children need richer experiences, such as language lessons and cultural immersion, to develop the skills that will help them get into top colleges and secure high-paying jobs. However, low-income families simply can't keep up with the Joneses. Most extracurricular experiences cost money—payment for private lessons, tuition to private schools, and even museum admission—that low-income families don't have at their disposal. As wealthier families are spending more on their children, low-income families are spending less. Parents in the lower 50 percent of the income distribution spent less on their children over the last 15 years than they did in the 1990s—likely as a result of inflation, increased cost of living, and decreased job security (Garland, 2013). Critics of state and federal aid programs assume that these low-income parents are not working and are spending their aid money on drugs, alcohol, or other luxuries instead of on their children, but the research indicates that this is not true. According to two separate studies, one in the U.S. and one in Great Britain, researcher Jane Waldfogel found that parents' disposable income is more often than not spent on items for children or items for work, like professional clothing or transportation (Waldfogel & Garnham, 2008).

While the ability of families to provide extracurricular enrichment for their children is not tied to any particular race, it does affect African American children the most because a disproportionally high number of Black children live in poverty. The effects are clear when you look at the school performance of African American children, especially boys. Having a variety of early-childhood experiences is directly related to the development of children's vocabulary, and having a strong and rich vocabulary is linked to reading skills (Garland, 2013). Even if they do manage to graduate from high school, African American males do not tend to fare well in academia.

Lack of Employment Opportunities

Once African American boys reach an employable age, opportunities to earn income to support themselves or their families are not as prevalent as they were in previous generations. Cities in the historic "Rust Belt"—the older cities found in the Northeast and Midwest—have large concentrations of African Americans. In the last 30 years, job growth has stagnated or plummeted in these cities as technology-based jobs are replacing traditional manufacturing jobs. While employment between 1991 and 2001 increased by 25 percent in the U.S., it only increased by 3 percent or less in these Rust Belt cities. For African American men who have limited experience and education, entry-level jobs are primarily in the service industry. For Black males, this means that not only is race potentially holding them back; so is gender. Women fill most of the service jobs, such as wait staff, sales clerks, and nursing aides. Instead of being perceived as friendly, inviting, and welcoming to customers, young Black men are perceived as threatening or dangerous regardless of their actual skills, perceptions that employers do not want in their service staff. The pervasive stereotype of the African American male is preventing them from obtaining and retaining employment in these customer-service jobs. Without opportunities for employment before earning industry experience or advanced education, which statistics say is unlikely for many Black boys, there are few chances for them to change their social situation (Wilson, 2011).

Even for African American males who secure stable employment, their earning potential is less than similarly educated White males. According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Black males will earn less on average than White males with similar levels of education, regardless of what that education is. For example, White males who have master's degrees will earn an average yearly salary of $88,427, while Black males with the same degree will only earn $64,456. For men who have a high school diploma or GED but no college degree, White men will make on average $35,307 while Black men will receive $25,418 (Wilson, 2011).

Downward Social Mobility

In 2018, a *New York Times* story reported that Black boys raised in the United States, even in the most well-to-do families and being brought up in some of the most affluent neighborhoods, still earn an income markedly lower than White boys with similar backgrounds in adulthood. This information was taken from a new study that followed the life trajectories of millions of children. White boys who grow up wealthy, more often than not, remain that way. The odds are that Black boys raised in well-to-do households are more likely to become poor than to stay wealthy in their own adult families (Badger, 2018).

How Are Students Affected by Parents with Low Incomes?

So far, we have looked at large-scale hurdles hampering the advancement of African American boys, such as housing disparities, lack of employment opportunities for their parents, and the cycle of poverty. Each of these issues is serious and should be addressed at a national level. However, African American boys also face many challenges closer to home. Parents and the home environment may play the most significant role in the academic success of African American boys.

Social and Emotional Effects of Low Income

Children who grow up in low-income families are more likely to have stunted emotional and social growth compared with higher-income peers. The home environment of children aged three and under greatly determines how they will behave emotionally as adults. Part of this emotional growth happens during infancy. Parents in poverty, particularly mothers, often suffer from depression, are overstressed, and do not have access to adequate healthcare, making it more difficult for them to bond with their infants (Jensen, 2009). When babies form weak attachments with their primary caregiver, it can lead to a sense of insecurity in children and prevent their brains from forming a full range of emotions. Not surprisingly, living in poverty is one of the major predictors of children developing depression as teenagers (Jensen, 2009).

Low-Income Homes and Chronic Stress

Growing up in low-income environments is also linked to chronic stress, a condition that has serious and long-lasting effects on children’s cognitive function as well as their social and emotional health. Chronic stress is stress that repeatedly occurs over long periods. Some of the major causes of chronic stress for low-income children include living in substandard, unsafe, and overcrowded houses and neighborhoods; family instability, such as divorce or loss of a family member; and limited access to resources such as utilities, refrigerators, or ovens

(Jensen, 2009). Physical abuse, physical neglect, and sexual abuse are major stressors. Unfortunately, children from low-income environments are more likely than higher-income children to experience at least one of these forms of abuse.

A scientific research study conducted by the University of Rochester on children aged two to four found that children in low-income families were more likely to have excessively elevated or low levels of cortisol, the stress hormone (Patenaude, 2015). Higher-than-normal cortisol levels can lead to decreased cognitive function, meaning that low-income children could have deficits in memory and problem-solving even before entering kindergarten. In addition to abnormal cognitive function, chronic stress is linked to difficulty concentrating and paying attention, loss of motivation and perseverance, decreased creativity, and impaired social skills and judgment (Jensen, 2009). All these skills directly correlate to success in school, and for African American boys who already score lower on standardized achievement tests, the results can be devastating.

Lack of Resources

As we saw in the previous section, the opportunity gap between the haves and have-nots is widening, as affluent parents are spending more on experiences and activities for their children that low-income parents simply can't afford. But the effects of poverty on students are even harsher when you consider the basic resources that they lack.

One significant but a seldom-considered resource that low-income parents cannot afford is time. In the first two years of a baby's life, he or she needs between ten and twenty hours each week of positive interaction with a parent (Jensen, 2009). This time, whether it is spent reading books, singing songs, asking and answering questions, or just playing, helps children develop the variety of emotions they will need later in life. Low-income parents (especially single parents) who work long hours at one or more jobs may not have the time to spend with their children. Once children are school-aged, they need daily interaction with books and words to become skilled readers. According to a 2002 study of kindergarteners' interaction with their parents, only 36 percent of low-income parents read to their kindergarteners each day, compared to 62 percent of high-income parents (Jensen, 2009).

Lack of access to physical resources presents another problem. Low-income students live with far fewer items than their higher-income peers. In low-income neighborhoods, the ratio of books to children is approximately one to three hundred, while in middle-income neighborhoods there are 13 books per child (Carter, 2013). Though we live in an era when books are not as prevalent as they once were, the differences are still staggering.

But perhaps the most conspicuous inequity for low-income children is in their access to technology. Regardless of their school environment, low-income students have less access to technology than middle- or high-income students (Celano & Neuman, 2013). To use computers with Internet access, low-income children have to rely on public resources, such as libraries or after-school programs. But these resources are not without flaws. Computers at these sites are precious commodities. There are usually in far greater demand than supply, and the wait to use them can be long. In some after-school programs, even if the computers are available, students may not be allowed to use them if there is no teacher available to supervise. Additionally, the public facilities often do not have funding to fix the computers if they get a virus or the hardware breaks, and sometimes the equipment is outdated and cannot perform the necessary tasks (Celano & Neuman, 2013).

What the lack of technology means for low-income students is that, in addition to trailing in academic achievement, they are missing out on opportunities to learn the technical skills they will need to succeed in a highly competitive global workforce. Having limited access to Internet-connected computers means that they don't have time to tinker or explore. They don't have time to practice basic skills such as typing or writing emails or more complex skills such as researching or coding. To compound the issue, teachers in low-income schools don't use technology as effectively or as often as teachers in high-income schools (Celano & Neuman, 2013). Instead of using computers to design, create, and explore, many teachers in high-poverty schools use them to reinforce or practice academic skills. While study games and practice quizzes are excellent activities, they don't make up for the creative computer time that many higher-income students enjoy at home. Students in higher-income families often learn to code on their own or start blogging or creating websites, tools that will be useful as they move into the job sphere. They learn to type and pick up word processing and image manipulation at home, whereas students from lower-income families must take classes to learn these skills. Many never do.

Lack of Parental Involvement

It is not breaking news that parents of low-income students are less involved in their children's education than middle- or high-income parents. Teachers, school administrators, and parents recognize that the lack of parental involvement is an issue for students who are likely already at risk, but it is important to understand why many low-income parents are uninvolved.

An obvious reason for the lack of parental involvement is a lack of availability. Many low-income parents work one or more jobs, often outside of a typical nine-to-five workday.

These low-paying and low-skill jobs often don’t allow for time off or flexibility to meet with teachers or attend school programs. Some parents may physically have the time away from work but spend most of their time taking care of other children or family members.

Another obstacle is a lack of reliable transportation to get to school events (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Add the physical difficulty of getting to school with many parents’ lack of confidence in the school system, and it is easy to understand why taking precious time to attend school events, teacher conferences, or field trips is not a priority.

A deeper-rooted obstacle to parental involvement is the cultural belief that schools don’t want low-income, minority parents to become involved. For many parents, the home and school operate in two disconnected spheres: parents are responsible for children at home, and teachers are responsible for children at school. Parents feel it is not their responsibility to teach their children what the school should be providing (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Often, teachers in high-poverty schools do little to alleviate this cultural belief. Whether stated or implied, many middle-class teachers of low-income students alienate parents through their language, sense of power, and lack of knowledge about their students’ cultures (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). When parents perceive a power difference between them and the school staff, they often step away from the school system entirely.

Finally, some low-income parents purposefully disengage from their child’s schooling when they sense that the teachers do not respect them or their children. In a society where African American males, a large percentage of the low-income demographic, are two and a half times more likely to be suspended as White students, it is important for parents to see teachers focus on more than negative behavior (Thompson, n.d.).

Solutions

Regardless of your political affiliation, social class, or personal beliefs, the fact is that Black boys are falling behind in our nation's schools. The good news is that individuals and organizations around the country recognize the problem and its causes and are implementing ways to overcome the obstacles to providing equal education. In this chapter, we tackled the income gap, which leaves parents unable to provide their Black boys with many of the resources and supports that they need to succeed. The following sections will present examples of programs aimed at providing Black boys with educational opportunities that will help them break the cycle of generational poverty that persists in Black America. We will also discuss programs and initiatives that are helping their parents close the income gap. Each subsequent chapter will end with a list of solutions.

Manhood Development Classes

One of the most innovative and promising new programs for Black male students is what Oakland Unified School District terms "Manhood Development Classes." More formally known as "Mastering Our Cultural Identity: African American Male Image," this elective course is offered to Black males in third through 12th grade at 20 schools in the Oakland school district. The courses vary for each grade, but in general, they teach students about African American history and prominent Black individuals, the civil rights movement, current cultural events such as the #Blacklivesmatter movement, and even business and economics topics. For high school students, the course also involves college visits and college mentoring. Most importantly, Black male teachers teach all the courses. While the topics covered in the curriculum are important, the courses are effective because they give Black boys positive role models who consistently support them and promote the importance of education—and they can connect with their students on a personal level. Over half the teachers in Oakland are White women, so having a teacher who looks like them and can relate to these boys is especially important.

The Manhood Development Courses are part of Oakland's Office of African American Male Achievement, a division of the public school system, that provides services to Black boys such as leadership councils, conferences, peer mentoring, and tutoring as well as these elective courses. While the office's initiatives are still in their infancy, early successes show promise for the future. For example, more than 50 percent of the students who started the Manhood Development courses as ninth graders got into college with a scholarship (Brown, 2016). By comparison, only 54 percent of all African Americans graduate from high school (Thompson, n.d.).

Other school districts around the country are following suit in offering programs specifically for Black male students. Minneapolis public schools have created the Office of Black Male Student Achievement, and Washington, D.C., has supported a $20-million campaign entitled "Empowering Males of Color." Other school districts, including New York City, have made commitments to hire male teachers of color (Brown, 2016).

Immersion Programs

After-School Programs

After-school programs are also effective at reducing the impact poverty and race have on academic achievement. The Afterschool Alliance, an organization aimed at educating the public on the importance of high-quality after-school programs, has compiled numerous statistics and examples of programs that work.

Here are a few examples of successful after-school programs around the United States:

- When compared with students not participating in the program, students enrolled in Los Angeles' BEST after-school program are 20 percent less likely to drop out of high school.
- Sixty-five percent of eighth graders who took part in Citizen Schools Eighth Grade Academy enrolled in a high-quality, college preparatory high school, compared with 26 percent of peers who did not participate.
- After a statewide study of a variety of programs in New Hampshire, researchers concluded that students who took part in after-school programs that focused on academics improved their behavior and academic performance by more than 50 percent (Afterschool Alliance, 2008).

Low-income students who enroll in after-school programs have increased attendance during the school day, higher graduation rates, greater gains in reading and math proficiency, better engagement in school, fewer behavioral issues, and a greater likelihood of taking college preparatory courses (Afterschool Alliance, 2008). Students who are engaged in consistent after-school programs are less likely to experiment with drugs, alcohol, or criminal behavior, and may even reap health benefits such as lower rates of obesity. Finally, parents who have children enrolled in after-school programs are more productive at work; in fact, they are able to work approximately eight additional days per year. Because they don't have to worry about whether their children are in safe environments, they are better able to stay on the job. For parents who have low-wage jobs, lack job security, or do not have job benefits such as vacation time or sick leave, eight days can make an enormous difference.

The federal government recognizes the positive impact of these after-school programs for low-income youth. There are several funding sources available to organizations and states to support the efforts of after-school programs. One of the largest sources is the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program. This funding is awarded by the Department of Education to states, which can then distribute the money to different after-school programs. Federal Food and Nutrition programs also add funding for after-school programs by providing aid for food to these organizations, so their funding can be spent on other resources. Some of the aid trickles directly down into the hands of low-income families. For example, the Child Care and Development Fund, in addition to funding child-care programs in the states, provides child-care vouchers to low-income families ("Funding", n.d.).

Boston: A City to Watch

The city of Boston has taken great strides in recognizing the obstacles to education for low-income families and directly addressing the issues. By partnering with local businesses, schools, mentors, and community organizations, Boston hopes to fill students' non-school hours, which comprise 80 percent of a child's waking time, with meaningful experiences that higher-income families would likely be able to provide for their children (Boston After School and Beyond, 2018). Promising initiatives such as this have the potential to help Black boys succeed.

Boston's approach is multifaceted. One of the main objectives is to fill students' after-school and summer time with purposeful and enriching activities. Boston After School and

Beyond (2018) aims to do this by providing opportunities such as outdoor programs, science exploration, and college and career immersion programs. For high school students, who are more interested in getting jobs, the city proposes a "Learn and Earn" program in which industries in the arts and civics fields provide paid internships to help students learn skills, make money, and earn school credit. The success of the initiative hinges on the participation of local organizations as well as communication. There are already many nonprofits in place that support students from low-income backgrounds, but they operate in isolation from each other, from families, and from schools. To truly close the opportunity gap for these students, all stakeholders need to communicate effectively, share data, and share responsibility for their successes and failures.

Conclusion

The income gap is real, and it is growing. Though we like to think of ourselves as the nation astride the world, with power and money at our fingertips, the truth is that the lowest quarter of our citizens are struggling. Sadly, the brunt of the burden is borne by minorities, and African American boys are among the hardest hit. As we saw in the story at the beginning of this chapter, even if a child is hardworking, bright, and well-behaved, the difficulties associated with living in poverty can drag him down to the point that he won't make it in school.

The technology gap is still wide, but it is slowly closing. However, the alarming lack of books and other reading materials in low-income families as well as the lack of quality time families spend with children should horrify us all.

What is needed, as we saw in the "Solutions" section, are holistic, full-bore solutions that aim to fill children's free hours with meaningful activities. The programs are most effective for

Black boys if they are presented by Black men; boys require role models with whom they can relate. As I know from my own experience, simply seeing a Black man in a skilled position—doctor, professor, author—can be enough to change a Black boy’s perspective, and possibly the trajectory of his life.

Chapter 3: Anti-Intellectualism (Obstacle 2)

In 2003, educational anthropologist John Ogbu published *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. The book, based on Ogbu's research in an Ohio suburb, examined the reasons African American students were not achieving the same academic results as their White peers. Ogbu concluded, as he had previously done following research in a Washington, D.C., school district, that part of the reason for the academic disengagement was a disdain for "acting White." In general, he claimed, African American students were hampered by a tendency toward anti-intellectualism (Ogbu, 2003).

Ogbu's book and conclusions generated enormous controversy and are still cited and argued over today. Some subsequent researchers have found evidence in support of Ogbu's claims, and others have comprehensively debunked them. Among the latter group is Ivory Toldson. In a recent article in *The Root*, Toldson (2013) analyzed data from a CBS News poll of a thousand students across the U.S. His analysis indicated that there was indeed a bias against academic achievement. For example, less than half of all students said that their friends would be supportive if they chose to study rather than hang out.

Similarly, less than a fifth of all students said that they viewed high academic achievers as "cool." However, when Toldson (2013) looked at how the different racial groups responded, he found that African Americans were, in fact, more inclined to support studying and view good students as "cool" (Toldson, 2013). In other words, anti-intellectualism is not confined to the Black population; it is a nationwide educational problem. There is an inclination among all students to shun the nerd and denigrate those who spend their free time on academic work.

Though writers have expended a lot of energy debunking Ogbu's research, what gets lost is that, whether or not it is primarily an African American problem, anti-intellectualism remains a significant obstacle to a Black boy seeking education. I know this from firsthand experience, both as a student and as a teacher; there is a vibe among a certain echelon of young African American males that disdains academic achievement. I am not claiming this vibe is absent among White students; the research indicates that White students are possibly *more* susceptible to anti-intellectualism. What I am saying is that if we are to achieve gains in educating Black boys, the anti-intellectual element will have to be counteracted. This chapter will examine the causes of anti-intellectualism as well as the means of rising above it.

A Faulty Foundation

A fundamental way anti-intellectualism manifests itself is in the lack of general knowledge that African Americans have on topics outside their immediate needs. In *The Age of American Unreason*, Susan Jacoby talks about the disturbing trend of record-high numbers of U.S. college graduates who seem to lack basic, foundational knowledge (Jacoby, 2008). A 2009 study conducted by Harris Interactive and commissioned by the California Academy of Sciences and Citizens discovered that most Americans could not answer basic science questions correctly. Not surprisingly, the study also indicated that African American students scored even lower than the national average (California Academy of Sciences, 2009). Despite these dismal results, 80 percent of Americans surveyed insisted that science education is "absolutely essential" for the U.S. economy, healthcare system, and global reputation (California Academy of Sciences, 2009).

The numbers tell us that the intellectual impoverishment of African Americans starts in childhood. A survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that while White children spent 31 minutes reading for leisure during the week and 37 minutes on weekends, Black students spent just 17 and 18 minutes, respectively. These numbers may not seem all that troublesome, but a lack of literacy has been found to have a strong correlation to crime: around 70 percent of U.S. inmates rank in the lowest brackets for reading comprehension and ability.

As we will see, the trend away from reading is worsening, due to the attractions of video games, online entertainment, and cell phones. However, it is not the only factor affecting academic disengagement among African American boys. First, let’s look at some of the other issues.

Sports Mania

The adulation of athletes is common throughout the United States but approaches religious fervor in many African American communities. Part of the reason for this is that a majority of athletes in certain sports are Black. For example, nearly three-quarters of players in the National Basketball Association are Black (Lapchick et al., 2011) and, in the NFL, around 70 percent of the athletes are Black (Moore, 2015).

It makes me cringe when I think of all the African American athletes who become role models and subsequently fall from grace. The problem with athletes as role models is not the fault of stars such as Woods or Hernandez. The core problem lies with Americans’ blind faith where athleticism is concerned. When was the last time you heard an African American boy name an astronaut or leading genetic researcher as his role model? Where is the love for philosophers, authors, and Nobel Prize winners?

The issue with the adulation of sports figures goes beyond the hypocrisy, however. The more trenchant problem is that, for the Black boy who emulates an NBA or NFL athlete, the chances of achieving the same success are minuscule—about the same as his chances of winning the lottery. There are fewer than 500 professional basketball players in the NBA, for example. Many more do play in college, of course, and some of those can snag college scholarships, but college sports present another set of problems.

Currently, the highest paid public official in 40 of the 50 states is either a football or basketball coach. The highest paid public official in the country (earning $7 million a year) is Nick Saban, the coach of Alabama’s Crimson Tide (Sauter, Stebbins, Frohlich, & Comen, 2015). This indicates precisely how much money is tied up in college sports. The coaches, for the most part, are worth the money; the games and merchandise bring in many times their salaries. However, the question we should be asking ourselves is whether sports at this scale even have a place in the educational setting. Though athletes are ostensibly required to maintain certain grade-point averages to stay on the team, college sports have become such a money mill that teachers are routinely prompted by authorities to change students’ grades or provide them with “second chances,” opportunities other students lack (Wennergen, 2012). Though there are, of course, stellar students among athletes, grade-fixing for student-athletes, even in high school, is commonplace. For example, at Miramar High in southern Florida, authorities “removed two math courses from one player’s transcript; entered three classes from the wrong year for another player; and incorrectly substituted a weight-training elective for a state-required course for a third player” (Shipley, 2014). The discrepancies were discovered, and the school was forced to implement changes, but similar issues are widespread around the country, and it must be presumed that most go unnoticed.

For a Black high school student who is, say, a star running back on his football team, his future may appear bright. He’s getting plenty of female attention, his coaches and parents praise him, and he revels in the cheers of the crowd on game nights. However, maintaining a position on a sports team requires a lot of time in the weight room, on the practice field, in the film room, or traveling to games. This is time that is taken away from studying. He may be good enough to get into college on a scholarship. But even if he can maintain the grades he needs in college, chances are vanishingly slim that he'll get picked for the NFL. So, what is he left with? A second-rate education eroded by grade-fixing, a few memories of the bright lights, and very likely a nasty case of chronic traumatic encephalopathy—a disease caused by recurrent head trauma.

The Entertainment Trap

As they have in sports, African Americans have had an outsized impact on the American entertainment industry. Much of what we currently recognize as popular music stems directly from African American roots; from blues, gospel, and jazz emerged rock 'n' roll, disco, and everything in between. Many of the early popular music legends, including Elvis Presley and Led Zeppelin co-opted African American musicians' work.

The rise of Motown as a musical genre and industry in the 1960s and '70s brought Black artists into the mainstream in unprecedented numbers. Acts such as the Supremes, the Jacksons, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye took the music world by storm. The Motown label had 79 top Billboard records during the '60s, and scores more the following decade (Gillett, 1971). By the mid-80s, Michael Jackson had become the biggest pop star in the world, and other Motown-spawned artists such as Lionel Richie also strode atop the charts.

Even as Motown was surging, a new genre, hip-hop, was gaining traction in the inner cities. Hip-hop was at some level a reaction to the sanitized, watered-down entity disco had become. Hip-hop was brash, talky, jerky, and abrasive; in short, it was electrifying. It provided a vehicle and creative outlet for inner-city voices that had previously been unheard, most of them young Black men.

One of the many strands to emerge from hip-hop was so-called gangsta rap, which echoed and detailed the violence and abuse rife in the impoverished inner cities. N.W.A.'s (1988) single "Fuck tha Police" epitomized the early years of the genre. With a bluntness the American public had not heard before, the song discussed police brutality and racial profiling, with lyrics that still resonate today:

"Fuck tha police coming straight from the underground
A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown
And not the other color, so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority . . ."

There was an immediate and prolonged backlash against gangsta rap from the mainstream, and presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton both decried the genre from their political pulpits (Philips, 1992). Though many in the establishment tried to shut down the genre and ban albums such as Body Count, these efforts largely failed and tended to boost the credentials (and sales) of the artists. Even African American luminaries such as jazz musician Wynton Marsalis and author Stanley Crouch lambasted the genre. In a widely read opinion piece for the *New York Post*, Crouch decried hip-hop as "cultural pollution that is too often excused because of the wealth it brings to knuckleheads and amoral executives" (Crouch, 2005).

Though current gangsta or hardcore rappers such as Lil Wayne and Young Thug consistently reference violence and drug use and denigrate women, I do not concur with those mainstream writers who suggest that “rap music” is destroying young Black men. I incline, rather, toward the analysis of sociologist Michael Eric Dyson of Georgetown University, who says, “Hip-hop music is important precisely because it sheds light on contemporary politics, history, and race. At its best, hip-hop gives voice to marginal Black youth we are not used to hearing from on such topics” (Dyson, 2007). What rappers such as Lil Wayne are doing is holding up a mirror to their culture. “Look,” they say, “this is what life is really like where I grew up.” These cultural entities should be listened to and preserved; in the future, we’ll look back on them with interest and view them not as the progenitors of Black violence and anti-intellectualism, but as creative prodigies and truthful commentators on a fraught period in America’s history.

I am not claiming that there is not a problem with idolizing musicians, however. Similar to sports figures, wealthy rappers are worshiped with a near-religious fervor. Young Black boys watching music videos think, “Hey, look at those cars, those women, that lifestyle . . . all I need is just one record deal, and I’ve got it all!” So, they hunker down, churn out a few beats and rhymes with their friends, and pin their hopes on striking gold. However, just as with sports, a vanishingly small percentage of aspiring rappers and musicians end up making a living from their art.

Musicians like Jay-Z, Sean Combs (P. Diddy), and Dr. Dre are idolized for their quick rise to wealth. Yes, Jay-Z is an innovator who is rightly regarded for his business acumen, but the emphasis on his monetary worth often overshadows his actual accomplishments. Instead of a cultural acknowledgment of the way Jay-Z used his intellectualism to grow his brand and company smartly, many believe that all it takes is the ability to rap and “one record deal” to achieve extreme wealth and prestige. That theory bases its validity on luck and fate and “being in the right place at the right time." This does not create a thirst for knowledge or a genuine love of creativity, but a desire for dollar signs.

The Abuse of Religion

African Americans are the most religious ethnic group in America. The Pew Research Center states that "African Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole, including level of affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer and religion's importance in life." Most African Americans (around 78 percent) are Protestant, and most of those belong to historically Black churches, which were formed during the time of slavery (Sahgal & Smith, 2009).

These churches have been a bedrock for African Americans through the years, establishing a center for the community to gather and share their joys and sorrows. They provided emotional and financial support in times of hardship and bolstered African American resolve during the long years of slavery and the struggle for emancipation. Furthermore, the churches have served as a creative cauldron, providing early platforms for musicians such as Whitney Houston and offering a space for public speakers to hone their art. From the churches came many of our greatest teachers and leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Jesse Jackson.

However, as in society at large, there is an anti-intellectual strain within the church that has taken its toll on the Black community. This shows up particularly in so-called megachurches, which have become more like staged music or comedy shows than traditional church services. These churches prey on well-meaning parishioners who would be reticent to part with their money for a cause such as providing art classes at their local public school, but who are susceptible to pleas purporting to be from God. Some churches rake in colossal sums—$420 billion since 1980, according to Tyler Media Services (“Black Churches Have Collected $420 Billion,” 2013). Where does this money go?

Televangelist Creflo Dollar, who heads the Atlanta-based World Changers Church International, was in the news several years back for requesting donations for a private plane. His previous Gulfstream III was getting old, and he wanted $60 million for a new top-of-the-line Gulfstream G650. His suggested donation was $300 per parishioner. The appeal was couched in religious language: “We believe it is time to replace this aircraft so that our Pastors and staff can continue to safely and swiftly share the Good News of the Gospel worldwide” (Borkett-Jones, 2015, para. 4). Though Dollar was widely ridiculed in the mainstream press, his flock came through; he raised the money to buy the new plane within a few months (Ohlheiser, 2015).

Another megachurch pastor, the late Eddie Long, who headed up the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, faced a lawsuit and the attention of federal investigators after he urged parishioners to support a Ponzi scheme allegedly perpetrated by his friend Ephren Taylor. After parishioners lost over a million dollars, they turned on Long, who was forced to retract his support for Taylor. Long was also under scrutiny for the more than $3 million he made from his nonprofit charity, Bishop Eddie Long Ministries, Inc. The charity’s “compensation” to Long included a six-bedroom, $1.4 million home and the use of a Bentley. Said Long, in his defense:

> We’re not just a bumbling bunch of preachers who can’t talk, and all we’re doing is baptizing babies. I deal with the White House. I deal with Tony Blair. I deal with presidents around this world. I pastor a multimillion-dollar congregation. You’ve got to

> put me on a different scale than the little Black preacher sitting over there that's supposed to be just getting by because the people are suffering (Blake, 2005).

Long, who was virulently anti-homosexual in public, later made the news when he settled lawsuits brought by young men claiming he'd used his position of influence to coerce them into sexual relationships.

Creflo Dollar and Eddie Long are two of the more reprehensible examples of church leaders taking advantage of a gullible public; there are many more who operate at a less ostentatious level. I am not claiming here that churches should be abandoned or that they do not perform a significant public service; rather, I am saying that it is too easy for a young person today to get sucked up in "religious" fervor, squandering their time and resources on charlatans. The preaching of the "prosperity gospel" is similar to the obsession with athletes and rappers: it's a type of magical thinking that relies on luck and divine intervention rather than education and hard work.

The Digital Vortex

One of the most drastic changes in the last two decades has been the digital revolution. This has transformed the American economic landscape, leading to an explosion of jobs in the digital sector and wonders such as the Internet and smartphone. However, though the Internet has certainly improved the dissemination of information, the digital revolution has also had a detrimental effect on intellectualism. I am not one of those who criticizes video games because of the violence, racism, or sexism they often perpetuate, though these are troublesome. After all, there seems to be little evidence to support the correlation some make between video game violence and violent actions (Ferguson, 2014). However, as with sports and the entertainment industry, video games can be such a time suck that they leave little room for reading and study.

As Susan Jacoby notes, “In 1982, 82 percent of college graduates read novels or poems for pleasure; two decades later, only 67 percent did. And more than 40 percent of Americans under 44 did not read a single book—fiction or nonfiction—over the course of a year.” She continues, “The proportion of 17-year-olds who read nothing (unless required to do so for school) more than doubled between 1984 and 2004. This period, of course, encompasses the rise of personal computers, Web surfing, and video games” (Jacoby, 2008, para. 6).

Video games, the Internet, and cell phone use offer instant gratification. They’re ridiculously fun, and unless their use is curtailed, they can become an all-consuming passion among young people. According to an influential Kaiser Foundation report, young people today spend an average of seven and a half hours on media devices—cell phones, computers, and gaming consoles—and that figure is rising. From the report: “A typical US child between 8- and 18-years-old is likely to live in a home equipped with three televisions, three VCRs, three radios, three CD/tape players, two video game consoles, and a personal computer.” Significantly, the report notes that “African American kids are more likely than White kids to report bedroom televisions, DVRs, cable/satellite TV connections, subscriptions to premium TV channels, and video game consoles” (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). In other words, a Black boy is more likely than a member of other groups to spend time in his room watching TV or playing a video game, rather than studying or reading.

Some may claim that the Internet can be educational and that cell phone use fosters communication skills; however, web surfing and texting are seldom used for educational purposes among Black boys. They aren’t perusing the *New York Review of Books* or browsing *Scientific American*. Much of their time online is spent on sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, and watching music and amusing videos on YouTube.

Solutions

For as long as humans have existed on this earth, anti-intellectualism has been with us. It permeates every race, religion, and culture, causing fear and discord. This is especially true in Black culture, as its tumultuous and trauma-filled history seems to give anti-intellectualism an additional energy source. For us to solve the Black boy crisis, we must break the shackles of anti-intellectualism and embrace the intellectual side of our history, which predates the Bible and reached its zenith during the empire of Mansa Musa and intellectual cynosure of Timbuktu. When this happens, we will no longer allow other people to tell our story; we will do it ourselves. In the meantime, let's focus on solutions that will help make this dream a reality.

Championing Intellectual Personalities

Recently, a spate of videos surfaced on YouTube and elsewhere by people purporting to prove that the Earth is flat. Among those beguiled by the videos was successful rapper Bobby Ray Simmons, Jr., who goes by the stage name B.o.B. He posted tweets and photographs repeating some of the faulty logic used by the flat-Earthers.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, the astrophysicist who hosts the show *Cosmos*, took B.o.B. on, countering his arguments on Twitter and then performing a delightful freestyle on *The Nightly Show with Larry Willmore*. During the show, Tyson said,

> Listen B.o.B, once and for all. The Earth looks flat because, one, you're not far enough away, at your size. Two, your size isn't large enough relative to Earth to notice any curvature at all. It's a fundamental fact of calculus, and non-Euclidean geometry—small

> sections of large curved surfaces will always look flat to little creatures that crawl upon it. (Wilstein, 2016, para. 7)

Tyson used classic dissing language in tandem with a solid scientific explanation; he ended with a mic drop saying, “By the way, this is called gravity!” (Wilstein, 2016, para. 7).

Tyson, who earned his doctorate at Columbia and did research at Princeton, has become a prominent science communicator on *Cosmos* as well as other platforms. He is in demand as a public speaker across the nation. What Tyson was able to do in taking on B.o.B. was couch his scientific knowledge inaccessible, meme-worthy language, and his takedown was widely disseminated across the web. Tyson is a rare example of a prominent African American in the sciences, and he often talks about the obstacles he faced, and still faces, as a Black man in a predominantly White field.

Cornel West, the Princeton philosophy professor, and author, has similarly used popular media to spread his ideas on race and justice. He appeared in the movies *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* and has put out several spoken-word albums, including *Street Knowledge* and *Never Forget*, performing with a hip-hop group.

Though Tyson and West will probably never reach the level of adulation achieved by Lil Wayne or Steph Curry, their outspokenness and willingness to use the vernacular and popular media in transmitting their ideas offer Black boys the intellectual role models they desperately need. For a Black boy who sees Tyson or West talk, suddenly the world is a larger place—a place where he could become an astrophysicist or a philosophy professor.

The focus on intellectuals rather than athletes and entertainers should begin at home and be furthered in the classroom. For many prominent intellectuals, the seed of their interest was sown by a single encounter with a personality in their field. For Tyson, it was Dr. Mark

Chartrand III, director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City, whose zeal for communicating scientific knowledge inspired Tyson (Farmer & Shepherd-Wynn, 2012). For West, it was Black theologian James Cone (West, 2000). For Charles R. Johnson, National Book Award-winning author of *Middle Passage*, it was an encounter with writer and cartoonist Lawrence Lariar, who educated him via correspondence (Nash, 2002). For a Black boy who has had a limited upbringing, simply providing exposure to prominent thinkers, inventors, and writers can open the window onto a universe of knowledge.

Mentors

Like many Black boys growing up in Cincinnati, Wesley Gallaher had dreams of becoming a star basketball player. However, soon after he entered the University of Cincinnati, he was contacted by members of a group called the Hearts and Minds Pipeline Program, which has teamed up with Mercy Health to provide minority students with exposure to medical professions. As founder Gary Favors says, “Our Black boys can do more than play athletics. We have to stop pigeon-holing them and start exposing them to other areas of interest.” African Americans are underrepresented in medicine; in fact, only 2.5 percent of medical school entrants are Black, a number that appears to have stagnated in recent years (Curnutte, 2014).

Favors worked closely with Gallaher, encouraging him to enter the medical field. Gallaher said, “A medical career was never in our scope growing up. It was never about being a doctor or engineer. It was all about being the next LeBron.” What Favors and other members of the mentoring group did for Gallaher was broaden that scope. Following Favors’s encouragement, Gallaher earned his degree in medical science and now works as a technician in a lab at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. He, in turn, has acted as a mentor in the Hearts and Minds program, offering others the chance to broaden their scope (Curnutte, 2014).

Mentoring works. In a study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program published in *Sage Journal*, researchers Jean Grossman and Joseph Tierney stated, "Over the 18-month follow-up period, youths participating in Big Brothers Big Sisters Programs were significantly less likely to have started using illegal drugs or alcohol, hit someone, or skipped school. They were also more confident about their school performance and got along better with their families" (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Other studies have turned up similar results. For example, Yolanda Barbier Gibson writes in the *Journal of Mason Graduate Research* that "African American males in mentoring programs tend to show higher self-esteem, higher levels of academic motivation, and performance. Also, evidence shows that when African American males have been given the opportunity to participate in higher education, and when well-conceived and formatted support systems such as mentoring programs are in place, they have been successful" (Gibson, 2014, p. 75). At its best, mentoring redirects the focus from sports, music, and video games, giving Black boys support for intellectual pursuit they often lack at home or among their peers. An ideal mentor is a successful person in the community—someone who has completed his education and now has a solid job. These mentors offer tangible alternatives to the sports-and-entertainment visions Black boys obsess over and are often the only such role models the boys will encounter.

Switching off the Screens

Psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair is the author of *The Big Disconnect*, a book about technology use and children. She says,

> If kids are allowed to play 'Candy Crush' on the way to school, the car ride will be quiet, but that's not what kids need. They need time to daydream, deal with anxieties, process their thoughts and share them with parents. (Steiner-Adair, 2013 as cited in Brody, 2015, para. 14)

She continues,

> Children have to know that life is fine off the screen. It's interesting and good to be curious about other people, to learn how to listen. It teaches them social and emotional intelligence, which is critical for success in life. (Steiner-Adair as cited in Brody, 2015, para. 16)

Steiner-Adair (2013) suggests that children under two should have no access to digital devices whatsoever and that they should be used sparingly after that. Most authorities agree with Steiner-Adair: screen time is debilitating and can lead to addiction and an inability to concentrate. However, screen use is increasing, and most schoolchildren today have their own cell phones, not to mention tablets, gaming devices, and computers. All too often, parents are terrible models, as they too are usually addicted to their screens.

Parents, schools, and after-school programs should heed Steiner-Adair's advice. Parents should model good non-screen behavior, refraining from playing video games while around children and doing activities such as reading and playing board games with their child. Strict limits should be placed on technology use. Screen time should be constrained and only permitted when homework and chores are done.

Some parents imagine that offering kids plenty of screen time is preparing them for the digital world, but the opposite may be true. Many high-level executives in the tech sphere place strict limits on screen time. For example, Steve Jobs, whose gadgets revolutionized the world, did not allow his children to have iPads. Chris Anderson, former editor of *Wired* and current executive at 3D Robotics, says,

> My kids accuse me and my wife of being fascists and overly concerned about tech, and they say that none of their friends have the same rules. That's because we have seen the dangers of technology firsthand. I've seen it in myself; I don't want to see that happen to my kids. (Bilton, 2014, para. 8)

Anderson says that rule number one for his kids is: "There are no screens in the bedroom. Period. Ever" (Bilton, 2014, para. 8).

What alternatives might these tech high-flyers offer? Here's Steve Jobs's biographer, Walter Isaacson: "Every evening Steve made a point of having dinner at the big long table in their kitchen, discussing books and history and a variety of things. No one ever pulled out an iPad or computer. The kids did not seem addicted at all to devices" (Bilton, 2014, para. 25).

Conclusion

This chapter has spotlighted the cultural influences, both inside and outside the African American community, that have led to disengagement in scholarly pursuits. We looked at several of the causes of academic disengagement and disinterest—the obsession with sports and entertainment personalities, anti-intellectual religious leaders, and technology addiction—that affect Black boys in America. We also examined ways in which the next generation of Black students can rise above expectations and boldly claim an intellectual future by looking up to strong intellectual Black leaders, through mentorship, and by disconnecting from digital devices.

Chapter 4: Racial Stereotypes (Obstacle 3)

Lessons of the Central Park Five

In the spring of 1989, five Black boys from Harlem were hauled into a New York City detective's office, accused of raping a White female jogger in Central Park. By the end of the night, all five had confessed to a crime they had not committed. The boys' ordeal began after sundown in New York's Central Park during a period of unusually high violence in the city. Their futures would be devastated by police coercion, a prosecutor hastily rushing to close the docket on a gruesome case, and a public all too ready to believe White police officers over Black teenagers. The boys would become known to the world as the Central Park Five.

Racial segregation had sharply divided New York City in the 1980s. At the turn of the decade, a surge in the market had created unimaginable wealth for New York's upper classes; however, most of the working poor did not gain from the newfound prosperity. The crack epidemic of the mid-1980s caused violent crime to escalate at an unprecedented rate. The nights were peppered with gunshots and sirens. For commuters, rampant muggings meant that the simple walk from their apartments to their neighborhood train stations was fraught with danger. In this atmosphere of fear and constant unrest, New York City's poor Black residents became the targets of police assaults and executions.

It was in this environment that, despite a lack of material evidence, detectives coerced five young men from Harlem into false confessions that permanently altered their lives. During the reign of terror of one of New York City's most prolific serial rapists, detectives ignored the evidence linking the brutal attack to that assailant and decided instead to force five young men to fit the narrative police had constructed. Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Korey Wise, and Yusef Salaam entered a grim holding cell. Separated from their families and support networks, they were subjected to psychologically traumatizing persuasion methods designed to extract confessions from the most hardened criminals. Each boy was shoehorned into what would become the worst miscarriage of justice New York City residents had ever witnessed. Psychologist Saul Kassin (as cited in Burns, 2012) estimated that the boys were confined in police holding cells for up to 30 hours without legal representation and suffered unrelenting abuse during that time (Burns, 2012). To make matters worse, the five young men found themselves at the center of a media maelstrom.

The flood of news reports (including graphic retellings of the events of the night in question) painted a tale of crazed boys running through the park at night, seeking victims on which to unleash their savage desires. “Wilding” was the media’s neologism to explain the uncontrolled and violent behavior that Black New York City teenagers allegedly engaged in.

The events had a drastic effect on the lives of the teenagers. Antron McCray’s father decided to abandon his son and his mother after his first court appearance. In the documentary *The Central Park Five*, Antron McCray said, “My father, as the trial came, he left my mother and me. Disappeared. I couldn’t understand. I just hated him after that” (as cited in Burns, 2012). Sadly, McCray’s father passed away before he and his son could be reconciled. The five boys spent between 6 and 13 years in prison.

Following the confession of a serial rapist in 2001, the Central Park Five were acquitted of all charges in the case and were eventually compensated in a $41-million settlement in 2019.

As we saw in the Introduction, the history of the Black male in the United States is one of unrelenting stigmatization, categorization, and abuse. However, the story of the Central Park Five caught the public’s imagination and represented one of the few times White Americans had to reconcile their prejudices with reality. The majority of White Americans had been willing to believe the police narrative; the fact that all five boys had “confessed” was definitive proof of guilt in their minds. When the reality emerged, Americans were forced to confront their demons—demons of their creation. They began to recognize for the first time the endemic effect racism was having on the lives of innocent young people.

Fast forward to the decade beginning in 2010, and the discussion over the disparity in the treatment of Black males had reached a fever pitch. A major wave of protests can be traced to an incident that happened on the evening of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida. A Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, was walking back from his neighborhood convenience store after buying a pack of Skittles when he was followed and confronted by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch captain. The subsequent events are shrouded in conflicting witness reports and evidence. What is certain is that a few minutes later, the unarmed Martin lay dead, shot by Zimmerman. The case sparked national attention when Zimmerman was released under Florida’s Stand Your Ground law. There were also indications that Zimmerman had targeted Martin in part because of his skin color, saying in his 911 call: “And he’s a Black male . . . Something’s wrong with him . . . These assholes, they always get away” (Weinstein, 2012, para. 3).

The Trayvon Martin case was the first in a series of violent incidents involving young Black men that captured the attention of the nation. In 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Once again, the actual moment of the shooting was shrouded in conflicting eyewitness reports; what was clear was that a young, unarmed Black man had been shot at close range. The incident led to days of riots and unrest in Ferguson and protest marches across the nation.

A few months later, Eric Garner, another African American man, was choked to death on a New York sidewalk after police tried to arrest him for selling cigarettes without a license. His last words, "I can't breathe," became a catchphrase, chanted by protestors across the United States. The officer who performed the stranglehold on Garner was acquitted by a jury.

Following these and other incidents across the nation, which claimed the lives of Jonathan Ferrell, Alton Sterling, Ezell Ford, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, Akai Gurley, Freddie Gray, Eric Harris, Samuel DuBose, and many others, a movement called Black Lives Matter sprang up and quickly spread on social media under the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter. The movement, which has chapters across the nation but is decentralized by design, aims to heighten awareness of the toll racial discrimination has taken on young Black men ("We Affirm That All Black Lives Matter," n.d.).

Just about every Black man in America can tell a story about a time he was racially discriminated against in a law enforcement situation. We learn from our fathers how to act when police officers approach the car: hold your empty hands outside the window, don't make eye contact, keep your voice low and respectful. We teach the same things to our sons. However, far too often, those tactics aren't enough. The ubiquity of cell phone cameras means that, in recent years, police officers have been caught shooting unarmed Black men and planting guns by their side, or brutalizing men who clearly have their hands raised, or, in an incident in North Carolina, violently arresting a Black man who was doing nothing more than sitting on his mother's porch, waiting for her to come home.

The statistics are excruciatingly clear. In a recent report entitled "The Science of Justice: Race, Arrests, and Police Use of Force," the Center for Policing Equity looked at racial disparities in police actions. They studied nearly 20 thousand police reports from 12 large urban areas (a million inhabitants or more) over the last 30 years. What they discovered was alarming: Even when they controlled the data carefully for arrest demographics, there were significant discrepancies in the use of police force when arresting Blacks and Whites. The report indicates that African Americans are nearly four times as likely to experience violence during an arrest as White Americans (Goff, Lloyd, Geller, Raphael, & Glaser, 2016).

What does this atmosphere do to the mentality of a young Black male? It means that the police are no longer helpful neighborhood assistants to be called in an emergency. It means that the police are an entity to be feared and avoided. It means that the world is fraught with danger and out to get him.

In his National Book Award-winning *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes an elegiac, lovely, terrifying, and terrified missive to his 15-year-old son. He describes the omnipresent fear of young Black men:

> When I was your age the only people I knew were Black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid . . . The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my West Baltimore neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world (p. 158).

Coates recounts a moment when he was taking his son to see *Howl's Moving Castle* and a White woman shoved the boy. When he admonished her, a White man came to her defense and told Coates, "I could have you arrested." In that moment, he knew he'd stepped outside his bounds and endangered his son by trying to protect him. However, upon further reflection, he realized that he and his son were both victims of an age-old American narrative that Black bodies were less valuable than White bodies; that they could be shoved around and arrested by the presiding powers; that, years after the abolition of slavery, they were confined by invisible fetters, whereas White bodies were free (Coates, 2015).

Racial profiling is a national epidemic. Though the history of African Americans in the United States is one of unrelenting discrimination, only in recent decades have researchers started to gather evidence of the profiling of Blacks and other minorities. In many areas, African American drivers are stopped much more frequently than Whites. For example, on Maryland Interstate 95, 77 percent of the drivers stopped by traffic police in 2002 were Black, though only 17 percent of total drivers were Black. The majority of those stopped were not charged with a crime, indicating that racial discrimination was the primary motive in stopping the drivers (Gabbidon, 2003).

Some high-profile incidents have served to bring the issue of "shopping while Black" to the public. As just one example, in an Eddie Bauer store in 1997, three Black youths were accused of stealing clothing that they had previously bought at the store. One of the boys was forced to take off his shirt and leave it in the store. The boys sued and received a settlement totaling a million dollars.

The racism is often systemic and comes from high up in the management echelons. For example, an employee at a store called The Children's Place accused her employer of racist directives. According to the employee, she was told not to give shopping bags to Black shoppers, not to offer perks, and not to talk about sales with them. That case as well resulted in a sizable settlement against the store.

A study in Madison, Wisconsin, indicated that Black shoppers are discriminated against, often from the moment they walk in the door:

> Customers are monitored closely, and without even the pretense of subtlety as they pass from area to area in the store. Employees of color, who develop personal clientele to target for sales and other customer promotions, are held in suspicion and questioned about the amount of time spent with customers, but only those who happen to be of color. Customers of color are regularly asked to provide more proof of identification than is asked of other customers. (Billups, 2000, p. 75).

Racism in the Media

Media portrayals of Blacks as poor also carry the connotation that they are lazy degenerates and criminally deviant. As David J. Knight (2015) points out, the representation of Blacks in national stories of poverty was sometimes doubled to project the view that Blacks are more closely associated with the poor than Whites. In *Beyond the Stereotypical Image of Young Men of Color*, David J. Knight says, “The caricatures of critiques of these young men usually pivot around common tropes: The violent, drug-involved gangster; the angry, withdrawn teen; the crude, disrespectful provocateur; the unsmiling, unfeeling, untouchable thug.” He goes on to note that the complex emotions, insights, and aesthetics of young Black men are often rejected by the public, who want to cling to their narrow definitions (Knight, 2015). It is also important to note that, with few exceptions, media portrayals do not examine the reasons for the clothing and attitudes of young Black men; reasons that Ta-Nehisi Coates so eloquently expresses.

Racism in Schools

Through disciplinary activities, school staff and administrators naturalize the perception of Black boys among their classmates and surrounding neighborhoods, furthering the stereotype that they are threatening and violent criminals. They influence the perceptions of White staff and students who see African American children being referred to police and suspended at disproportionate rates. Knight articulates the problem: “They often see [the Black boy] as a physical threat. Americans’ perspective on this young man then becomes the control and policing of his body—rather than the acknowledgment and affirmation of his mind and soul” (Knight, 2015, para. 7). This disciplinary approach naturalizes punitive actions toward Black students, and their White peers internalize the notion that Blacks are dangerous.

In the spring semester of 2012, a girl was hauled into the dean’s office at Chicago’s Hinsdale South High School for smoking marijuana. She admitted to wrongdoing and told the authorities that three other students had been smoking with her. Three of the four students received punishment. The girl and her friend, who were White, were suspended for five days. One boy, who was White, received no punishment. However, the fourth student, a Black boy, was not only suspended for a full week; he was also arrested and pleaded guilty to being in possession of drug paraphernalia.

The issues at Hinsdale first came to light when a board member reviewing the annual suspension statistics realized that the discipline meted out for the same offense differed from case to case. Drilling down into the details revealed that Black students tended to receive greater punishment for the same crime. A *Tribune* investigation revealed that the Hinsdale incident was not an isolated case (Rado, 2012). Black students frequently receive greater discipline for the same misdemeanor; moreover, they are more likely to be reported to the police than White students. In Hinsdale Township High School District 86, eight percent of students are Black. However, 21 percent of students reported to the police during the 2009–10 school year were Black.

The Black boy who was arrested in connection with marijuana use was bewildered by the unequal punishment he received. “I can’t say if it was because I was Black or not,” he said. But he noted, “I had to go through way more than [the other three students] had to go through . . . It makes no sense to me.” Sadly, he now has a record of court supervision, which will follow him throughout his life and could cost him a stellar job or a college scholarship (Rado, 2012).

Those children who are suspended or expelled are the ones most likely to become incarcerated, and school disciplinary activity funnels unwanted children into the juvenile justice system (NPR, 2014).

The frightening fact that a simple schoolyard tussle can end with Black children in police custody without their parents’ knowledge and charged with assault. This should be a wake-up call to those idly tending to their daily humdrum while turning a blind eye to those Black children suffering under the character-defining yoke of a biased education system. This problem has become so pervasive that U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder was forced to make a statement against discrimination in schools. He said, “A routine school disciplinary infraction should land a student in the principal’s office, not in a police precinct” (NPR, 2014).

Here are the alarming statistics on Black students and discipline:

- Regardless of age, Black students are three times more likely than White students to be suspended.
- Black students make up about 16 percent of enrolled students, but more than a quarter of students referred to the police are Black.

- Students with disabilities make up about 12 percent of the student population, but they make up 75 percent of those restrained at schools. There’s a racial gap there, too. Blacks are about 19 percent of the population who have a disability, but they make up more than a third of students who are restrained at school through the use of a mechanical device or equipment designed to restrict their freedom of movement (Rado, 2012).

Unfortunately, the unequal discipline in schools and racist narratives in the media have combined to create a sense (often unconscious) that African American males are inclined to criminal behavior. In a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 264 mostly White female undergraduates were asked to rate the innocence of people based purely on photographs and descriptions of their supposed crimes (NPR, 2014). Their responses showed that White Americans have an inherent bias against Blacks. Participants consistently thought that the Black boys depicted were older than their White or Latino counterparts and considered them more culpable (NPR, 2014). Black and brown students are more harshly punished for the same infractions that their White counterparts commit. Higher rates of misbehavior and socioeconomic disparity do not account for the gap in punishments, as African American students are nearly four times as likely as White students to be suspended or expelled. This proportion is equivalent to having 46 percent of Black students removed from school for disciplinary reasons even though, Black students only account for 18 percent of total student enrollment (NPR, 2014).

On a national level, the number of children suspended or expelled from schools who find their way to the juvenile justice system is astounding. Students receiving just one such disciplinary infraction were nearly three times more likely to find themselves standing before a judge as a direct result of misbehavior in school. As minority children are increasingly ushered out of classrooms, they are increasingly received into juvenile court systems and prisons. David Knight offers this insight:

> This perceptive, emotional depth . . . is a strength that schools only need to seek out and acknowledge in young men of color. It's a simple but radical change, and it unearths sorely needed counternarratives that help disentangle what is true and good in these young men from the denigrating stereotypes about them. (NPR, 2014)

Expressions of Internalized Anger

Psychologists tell us that fear breeds anger. In particular, fear that is suppressed and internalized often emerges as anger, and in some cases as violent anger. A young Black boy who grows up terrified of the dangers of the streets and fearful of setting foot in White-frequented shopping areas will often react in one of two ways. He may become withdrawn and choose to spend time in his room playing games or under his hoodie with headphones on. Or he may choose to go the other route and act out, wearing clothes chosen to make him stand out, swaggering down the center of the sidewalk and broadcasting his music. Both directions, of course, will exacerbate the tensions with the White community and further the notion that the Black boy is separate. It should be understood, however, that these are natural reactions to an environment in which the Black boy does not feel welcome or comfortable.

Solutions

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Dubois, 1903).

This quote was taken from W.E.B. Du Bois's 1903 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and is just as powerful now, as it was when it was first published. It sums up the torrent of emotions that Black boys bury deep inside their souls. It's the only way that can deal with the unbearable racist stereotypes and innuendos that are levied against them on a day-to-day basis. How can we help them succeed despite the persecution and discrimination that they face? While I don't have all the answers, I am confident that I have a few solutions.

Safe Spaces

Creating spaces that allow Black youths to engage in critical discourse about those feelings and experiences that define their identities is key. These may be after-school programs that include a discussion section with a trained social worker. They may be sessions with school counselors or a trusted teacher. They may be meetings with a pastor or other religious leader. What is of paramount importance is that the counseling party recognizes the difficulties of a Black boy growing up in today's America. For this reason, it may be profitable to seek successful Black men who have emerged from a similar background and can offer pertinent, focused advice.

Restorative Justice

Several states have begun initiatives to decrease suspensions within their school systems. Many of the solutions involve what is termed “restorative justice.” This technique is focused on creating nonviolent, non-punitive solutions to interpersonal problems such as bullying and dealing with infractions. The emphasis is not on the punishment of the offender, but rather on repairing harm and creating whole, positive relationships. Often, the solution is achieved through mediated interactions between victim and offender. The outcome may vary according to the situation, but the approach has been shown to be overwhelmingly positive. When used appropriately in a school setting, restorative justice not only greatly reduces the number of infractions, but it also leads to changed behavior among offenders because they are more aware of the damage their actions have caused. Schools across the nation have embraced restorative-justice principles, with great success. For example, West Philadelphia High School saw a 52-percent reduction in violent incidents following their adoption of restorative justice. Furthermore, youth who were involved in restorative justice mediation were much less inclined to repeat the offending action (Fronius, Persson, Guckenberg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016).

Many disciplinary incidents in schools have a racial component. Restorative justice can help air those issues, bringing them to the fore and ensuring they are talked about; this often does not occur when punitive measures are used or when police are called in. Schools across the nation should consider introducing these methods.

Enhancing the Police

Following the Trayvon Martin case and other widely publicized incidents of racially motivated violence, many communities and organizations such as schools have implemented “diversity training" modules for police and security officers. For example, the West Lafayette, Louisiana police force is requiring an extra two hours of training for its officers per year, focused on recognizing and dealing with culturally diverse populations. However, at state and national levels, diversity training is either not required or is only minimally required. Such training should be mandatory for all police and security personnel (Flores, 2015).

Nationally, the use of body cameras by police has been shown to drastically reduce the number of violent incidents and complaints of racial profiling. In a study by the University of South Florida, researchers looked at a pilot program during which Orlando police wore body cameras. About half the officers wore body cameras for over a year; the other half did not. Though the officers initially insisted that wearing body cameras would not affect their behavior, the outcome was clear: use-of-force incidents dropped by 53 percent among officers who wore body cameras. Even more strikingly, civilian complaints against those officers were 65 percent lower. Because violence tends to beget violence, wearing body cameras also reduced the number of injuries police officers sustained; they were less inclined to engage physically with those they confronted. The Orlando police chief is now pushing for all officers to wear body cameras. His efforts are assisted by half a million dollars in federal funding (Wing, 2015). Though it won't solve the underlying causes of racial profiling, a push at the federal level to ensure all officers wear body cameras will almost certainly reduce the incidences of racially motivated police brutality.

Conclusion

We need to teach young Black men to identify themselves in opposition to negative media presentations. Also, we need to create safe spaces where black boys can express intimacy and notions of love accompanied by behaviors that support selfless acts. We can utilize education to naturalize the narrative of compassion into masculinity that is currently lacking in the lives of many African American boys. Ignorance is the enemy. The result is that Black kids get locked up.

Offering the knowledge and skills necessary to aid Black children in defining themselves in the eyes of the public is not a one-sided endeavor. Although we may instill these values in Black boys matter at houses of worship, at community recreation centers, and at the dinner table, we also need our institutions to do their fair share. We can start by implementing restorative justice in schools as an alternative to disciplinary methods. At a community level, we should insist that police departments undergo diversity training and wear body cameras. These measures should assist in reducing the damage done to Black bodies and will hopefully heighten awareness of the inherent racial bias in our communities.

Chapter 5: Social Promotion and Retention (Obstacle 4)

Don Barry's mother knew her son wasn't doing well in school. "I knew he wasn't good at math," she says. "And he hated teachers asking him questions—because he didn't know stuff. He wasn't going to ask the teacher. So, he was probably just doing it and doing it wrong." After the first semester, the school told Ms. Barry that her son would likely be retained that year. It didn't come as a shock to her, though it did to Don. Ms. Barry says, "He thought he was like untouchable and would pass anyway—even though he wasn't doing any work."

The retention, according to Ms. Barry, had severe consequences for her son's social life. "Don felt bad like you know some of his friends knew he was still in the same grade. He got to a point where he didn't care. He started going out a lot more, like not being at home and not even trying to do his work." Sadly, Don was bullied by his former classmates. Ms. Barry reports: "His friends treated him like he really wasn't nothing because they were in a higher grade because they passed. They wouldn't kick it with him like they use to and when he would ask them about work or something they would start laughing at him or look at him like he was stupid or something."

Standardized testing appears to have been a factor in keeping Don back. Ms. Barry says,

> The WKCE [Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination] at the beginning of the year. That was a major determination whether or not he should be passed. He did not do well at all on the WKCE. And along with him not doing well during the semester—not turning in work, not on track of school work, coupled with the WKCE—he was destined to flunk (Williams, 2007).

According to Ms. Barry, retaining her son was an unqualified disaster. "I think the main reason Don was retained was not doing his work," she notes, "but he's still not doing his work, and it seems like his attitude has gotten worse" (Williams, 2007). Don Barry's experience is typical. Black boys are retained and socially promoted at higher levels than other groups. Retention is one of the strongest indicators that a student will drop out of school (Fashola, 2005).

Numerous studies have shown that holding children back a grade has little to no effect on their academic achievement, and it has a decidedly negative effect on their social lives (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Despite this evidence, the U.S. educational system retains students at extremely high rates. This is especially true for economically disadvantaged African American boys. In urban schools in the United States, like the Milwaukee school Don Barry attended, nearly half of all students are retained. The financial cost of retention to Americans is extremely high—around $20 billion each year (Williams, 2007).

Social promotion, which is the promotion of students to the next grade despite having failed, is no solution. Inevitably, the promoted students will not be able to do the work unless there is a significant intervention (Hong & Yu, 2008). Teachers, students, and parents find retention and social promotion policies confusing. Retention causes many students to panic or become depressed, and their parents are often at a loss as to how to deal with the news. For the Black boy in America, a state of resignation often sets in once he's been retained; he finds it difficult to imagine a way forward through the educational system. How did we get to this place? Let's take a brief look at the history of social promotion and retention in the United States.

Beginnings of Retention as Policy

The pass-fail culture in the U.S., like many other aspects of the school system, has its roots in the elite nature of the educational structure. Education in America was originally seen as an activity for the wealthy—for children whose parents did not need them to work. In 1830, for example, a committee in Pennsylvania denounced urban public schools because they served mostly the poor (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In the South, which was where most African Americans initially resided, this notion was even stronger. As we saw in Chapter 1, Southerners resisted public education for much longer than their Northern counterparts. Their penchant for private education stemmed primarily from racist motives: it allowed them to maintain prices too high for the primarily Black lower classes. It was, of course, in their best interests to keep the workers uneducated.

Horace Mann, the father of the concept of the common school, embodied the spirit of educational idealism during the first half of the 1800s. Mann was born into a poor Massachusetts family. Mostly self-taught, he secured a place at Brown University, where he honed his public-speaking ability. At the time, the Massachusetts education system was in trouble. As secretary of the first board of education in the U.S., Mann gave lectures and started the *Common School Journal*. He touted a system of universal education (Osgood, 1997). Mann's six educational principles would influence the American education system for years to come:

1. Citizens cannot maintain both ignorance and freedom;
2. This education should be paid for, controlled, and maintained by the public;
3. This education should be provided in schools that embrace children from varying backgrounds;

4. This education must be nonsectarian;
5. This education must be taught using the tenets of a free society; and
6. This education must be provided by well-trained, professional teachers ("Horace Mann," 2018).

Mann's positive influence cannot be denied. However, students who weren't able to compete academically dropped out, and there was no support in place for those who had learning disabilities or who came from impoverished backgrounds. As one-room schools disappeared in the early decades of the 20th century, replaced by age-graded schools with multiple classrooms and specialized teachers, retention became more common. The basic issue was one that continues to frustrate educational professionals today. That is, schools are mandated by law to provide education to all students and are supposed to achieve a certain standard of education for those students. However, many students are unable to achieve the correct standard. What should happen to these students?

A Nation at Risk, written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, called for reforms to increase academic standards and improve teacher quality (USDOE, 1983). Education based on solid standards would, the authors argued, reduce social promotion and retention. By the mid-1980s, most American educators believed promotion should be based on the mastery of grade-appropriate content and knowledge (Spring, 1994). By 1998, the Clinton administration was calling for an end to social promotion (USDOE, 1983). Many states passed legislation that prohibited the promotion of children who did not reach the required levels of performance assessments.

Current Reality of Retention and Social Promotion

The educational crisis among Black males in this country is genuine and dire, and it has an alarming knock-on effect. From a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

> Fewer than 20 percent [of Black boys] are proficient in math and reading in both fourth and eighth grades. Just over half graduate from high school. . . . Only 17 percent of all Black male students who enter community colleges will earn certificates or associate degrees or transfer to four-year institutions within three years. (Gose, 2014, para. 7)

By the time they are 15, more than half of Black boys are below their modal age group. Compare this to the statistic for White girls, traditionally a high-performing group: at the same age, less than a third of White girls are below their modal age group (Hauser, 1999). And, of course, the paucity of African American men with college degrees means they are underrepresented in the workforce, have lower-paying jobs, and are more likely to turn to crime to make ends meet.

Retention does not work as well as promotion, at least in the short term. As sociologist Robert M. Hauser says,

> The costs of grade repetition are large—both to those retained and those who must pay for repeated schooling. Moreover, the presence of older students creates serious management problems for schools. Most important, the available evidence shows that retention has no lasting educational benefits, that it typically leads to lower achievement (than promotion) and to higher rates of school dropout. (Hauser, 1999, p. 3)

Clearly, retention has a significant effect on the dropout rate. Multiple studies have shown that students who are retained are more likely to leave school early. A study by Temple, Reynolds, and Miedel (1998), for example, indicated that retention increased dropout rates by

12 percent. The study was significant, as it controlled factors including program participation, social background, school moves, and special-education placement. A study by Anderson that controlled for cognitive ability, sex, race, and many other factors indicated that students who repeated a grade were 70 percent more likely to drop out (Hauser, 1999).

Educational tools to counter retention include extended kindergarten, academic tracking, and special education services. However, this can lead to strain on teachers, and one group is often left floundering. All too often, that group contains Black boys.

Psychological Effects

In an influential and much-discussed study, Fanguy and Mathis (2012) investigated eight students who had been retained. Fanguy and Mathis were interested in the underlying causes of retention and were determined to get beneath "the tip of the psychosocial iceberg." Fanguy and Mathis's study looked at eight students who had been retained in eighth grade. Five were White, and three were Black; five were boys, and three were girls. After interviewing the students and their parents, Fanguy and Mathis pulled out some of the factors that led to their retention. One had been sick for some of the year, one had a sick mother, and one lived in a "bad" neighborhood, where drug transactions and violence were common. Poor behavior patterns and lack of preparation were other issues cited.

Three of the students said that after they were retained, they experienced a sense of hopelessness. Their inability to do difficult assignments caused them to act out, in the classroom and out of it. One student said that she "cried and cried and cried" after she'd been retained. Others noted that they were angry and withdrawn after receiving the news. Two students reported being heartbroken after all their friends had moved up a grade. The best friend of one student moved up, and the friendship came to an end, which was extremely difficult (Fanguy & Mathis, 2012).

Like Don Barry, whose story we heard at the beginning of the chapter, most of the students in the study were bullied: they were called names such as “stupid” and “dumb.” Two of the students mentioned getting into fights as a result. Just two of the parents said that they were aware that their students were being teased. Several of the students interviewed by Fanguy and Mathis (2012) said they felt an increase in stress and intensely disliked school. One student received a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) following the retention. This indicates that schools sometimes use student retention as an intervention strategy when the underlying cause is a learning disability, supporting the research of Beebe-Frankenberger, Bochian, MacMillan, and Gresham (2004).

The primarily negative reaction by the students indicates that retention had a strong negative impact on self-esteem. Disruptive behaviors and behaviors influenced by peer pressure became an issue among the retained students. One student’s father mentioned that he felt his child had low self-esteem, and another parent noted that their daughter “felt bad about herself largely as a result of their retention experience” (Fanguy & Mathis, 2012). A third parent said their child called herself “stupid.” Furthermore, one of the students indicated that they intentionally did not set challenging goals because they feared they would not be able to achieve them (Fanguy & Mathis, 2012).

Several students in the Fanguy and Mathis (2012) study suggested they felt victimized by the teachers. One student said they felt like dropping out of school to get away from the anger and sense of failure, as well as to avoid the teachers’ victimization (Fanguy & Mathis, 2012). The Fanguy and Mathis study, like many others that have examined retention, clearly indicated that retention is destructive to a student's educational and emotional well-being. Not all retained students experience such debilitating self-esteem issues, anger, or victimization; however, the findings suggest that retention creates some problems, and often leaves students with a sense of failure.

Socially promoted students report experiencing similar problems, including a poor sense of self-worth, poor self-esteem, and anger toward teachers. Some studies indicate that socially promoted students experience more problems with bullying and isolation than those who are retained. Influential psychologist Erik Erikson noted that a high level of self-esteem was critical to identity development in adolescents. When they feel good about themselves, adolescents tend to have a positive identity, while those who do not feel good about themselves tend to struggle with their identity and can develop disruptive, dysfunctional behaviors (Erikson, 1968). Most in-depth, long-term studies indicate that retention is a disaster, and social promotion is not much further up the ladder. In the next sections, we'll look at ways of surmounting these obstacles.

Solutions

To surmount the problems that create retention and social promotion, we must address two key areas. First, the shackles that currently confine students must be loosened. In the system at present, students who fail standardized tests will usually fail the grade. This leads to retention or dropout. Retention should be used only in the most extreme situations. If it is used, it should be only in the first three grades. Social promotion is thus a necessary part of the solution. However, social promotion cannot be simply a push up the grade ladder. We must start to loosen the boundaries between grades so that students have room to learn at their own pace.

Second, a strong support system is of paramount importance. One of the most important systems, particularly for African American boys, is mentorship. Every Black boy who is socially promoted should be provided with a mentor, either within the school or in the community. One-on-one mentorship should be accompanied by solid support from trained staff and teachers within the school.

Multiage Classrooms

The one-room schoolhouses of Horace Mann's time let students of similar ability come together, regardless of age. Later, Marie Montessori advocated for classrooms that were loosely organized. In her model, later known as the "Montessori method," students could mingle, moving around the classroom freely. Montessori schools incorporate multiage classrooms for ages three to six, though many schools increase the range. Montessori classrooms often have students at many different levels. This is because students are encouraged to learn by interacting with materials and ideas and are allowed to proceed at their own pace. Contrast this system with the current U.S. public educational system, which expects every student to fit a single mold and learn at the same pace.

Multiage classrooms "loosen the buckle" and allow students more freedom to learn at their own pace. This is particularly important for those who come from lower socioeconomic spheres. Multiage classrooms have been proven to work and should be adopted at a national level through at least third grade and preferably through sixth grade.

Expanding the Definitions

Our current testing system focuses obsessively on the language and mathematical ability of students. Teachers are thus forced to emphasize those areas. In a growing number of public schools across the country, music, physical education, and art are not offered unless parent groups fight and fundraise for them.

Educational researcher Howard Gardner has suggested that there are many more core areas of intelligence than just language and math. In other words, people express their intelligence in at least nine different ways, contrary to what we are taught in school. Gardner's categories are:

1. Verbal-linguistic intelligence
2. Logical-mathematical intelligence
3. Spatial-visual intelligence (artistic and engineering intelligence)
4. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence
5. Musical intelligence
6. Interpersonal intelligence (ability to detect the moods and desires of others)
7. Intrapersonal intelligence (ability to be self-aware)
8. Naturalist intelligence (ability to recognize and categorize plants, animals, and other elements of nature)
9. Existential intelligence (ability to tackle deep questions about human existence) [Northern Illinois University Faculty Development and Instructional Center, n.d.].

Gardner's notions of an expanded group of categories have been incorporated in both private and public schools across the country. At the Howard Gardner Multiple Intelligences

Charter School in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the Howard Gardner Community School in Chula Vista, California, education has a much broader focus. In its philosophical statement, the Chula Vista school says its “project-based curriculum integrates creative problem solving into every segment of the curriculum” (“Our Philosophy and Curriculum,” n.d.). Students at schools based on Gardner’s ideas do take the state tests; however, the staff does not “teach to the test.” By providing students with a well-rounded education, they naturally provide them with the skills they require to pass the tests while also giving students the tools to succeed in life.

Schools based on Gardner’s ideas are highly successful, and his ideas should be implemented in our curriculum and in our testing. My experience in the classroom has taught me that it is common to have students who have focused abilities, such as artistic or musical talent. Standardized testing can weaken the morale of these students who feel they are stupid because, for example, they have difficulty doing math. All students’ gifts should be celebrated. By adopting Gardner’s approach, we can ensure that their unique gifts are nurtured.

Integrated Tracking

Tracking, which is based on IQ tests, other tests, and (sometimes) no more than a teacher’s inclination can be a powerful tool. For example, students who require more math assistance may take it for two periods rather than one. Tracking offers students support in the areas where they need it. However, we must recognize that there is some stigma associated with tracking. Here, is a quote from a teacher whose school uses tracking:

> The Regents kids of today are just a touch above our general level kids of a decade ago. Then I have the other kids who are nice kids and get decent grades but are WAY behind

> the top kids. Gads, I love my period 1 and 4 honors chem classes!!!! They are some of the best kids I have ever had the honor of teaching. (Burris & Garrity, 2008, p. 19)

Let's look at the language the teacher uses: "Regents," "general level," "top kids," "honors," and "best kids." If the teachers use this type of stratified language, the kids on the playground are certainly using terms that are similar or worse. It is clear that the teacher is putting her emphasis on the group that needs it least. In *Detracking for Excellence and Equity*, Burris and Garrity (2008) note that when,

> observed differences are reinforced by track placement and grouping practices, and children then internalize those differences, learning opportunities become limited for all but the elite student. The talents of late bloomers go undiscovered, and the rewards of hard work and diligent study are never realized. (p. 197, para. 5)

Schools may claim that it is possible for students to move up along the tracking levels; however, Burris and Garrity note that this is rare. Moving down, on the other hand, is common. Thus, tracking too often has a negative rather than a positive effect. From my experience, I know it can be used as a tool to control behavior: a smart student who is problematic in the classroom is more likely to be sent down (Burris & Garrity, 2008).

Finland, which has one of the highest reading levels worldwide, realized early on that the tracking system was not working. It abandoned "ability grouping" in 1985 and brought special education into the regular classroom (Coughlan, 2004).

We can call this model "integrated tracking." It retains many of the positive aspects of tracking, including longer periods spent on certain subjects and strong support for students who need it, but brings them into the traditional classroom. Integrated tracking requires directed teacher training and superb staff support, but it has been shown to be highly effective.

Conclusion

Retention, in tandem with standardized testing and rigid grade structures, is like a barrier in front of Black boys in the U.S. The barrier is so high that young African American boys cannot see a future beyond it. If they are poor, they simply don’t know any Black males who have surmounted the barrier. So, they give up.

The solutions we looked at in this chapter can help pull down that barrier. Putting multiage classrooms in place, broadening our definitions of “intelligence,” and following the Finnish model of heterogeneous classrooms that offer support for students with differing abilities, we can allow the Black boy to glimpse a future for himself in education—a future that could lead him to graduate from high school and then college, and then finally enable him to land a job that allows him to support himself and his family with dignity.

Chapter 6: School-to-Prison Pipeline (Obstacle 5)

Horrors of Incarceration

Kalief Browder was a middle-of-the-road student. At 16, he was making mostly Cs, but his teachers called him “very smart,” and he was well liked by his classmates. He came from a broken home—his father had moved out when he was 10—but by all accounts, his mother was an astonishing caregiver (Gonnerman, 2014). She raised seven children of her own and mothered over two dozen foster kids. Their two-story brick house in the Bronx was overflowing with love and nurture, and Browder had male role models he looked up to.

Like most young Black boys in the Bronx, Browder had had some minor run-ins with the law. At one point, a couple of his friends had taken a delivery truck on a short joyride. Though Browder was an onlooker, he was charged along with them. But Browder had never been genuinely involved in a crime.

On May 15, 2010, Browder and a friend were walking home from a party when a police car pulled up alongside them. According to the officer, a man in a nearby police car claimed Browder and his friend had just robbed him (Gonnerman, 2014). Browder denied it and asked the officer to search him. He had nothing on his person. The officer consulted the man who then changed his story, claiming the robbery had been committed two weeks earlier. Again, Browder denied it.

Browder was taken to the precinct and then to Central Booking at the Bronx County Criminal Court. Later, he was transported to the notorious Rikers Island prison. Thus, began three years of nightmare. Unlike most other young Black men who are taken to prison under dubious charges, Browder refused to take a plea bargain in exchange for admitting guilt. Instead, he insisted on his innocence and insisted throughout the process that he wanted a trial.

Unbelievably, the trial never came. Because of incompetent, overworked attorneys and a byzantine justice system, Browder's trial was continually postponed: from December to January, from January to March, from March to June, and so on, over and over, until more than two years had passed. Though Browder could have taken the plea bargain, he kept insisting that he was innocent. His lawyer said, "Ninety-nine out of a hundred would take the offer that gets you out of jail. . . . He just said, 'Nah, I'm not taking it.' He didn't flinch. Never talked about it. He was not taking a plea (Gonnerman, 2014)." And meanwhile, the case against him was looking weaker: the accuser was waffling on the date the robbery had occurred. However, cases that go to trial are rare in the Bronx. In 2011, only 165 felony cases went to trial, while the defendants pleaded guilty in nearly 4,000 of felony cases (Gonnerman, 2014).

Life within Rikers, which is notorious for violence and abuse by both inmates and warders, was getting increasingly grimmer. At one point, Browder asked another inmate to stop throwing shoes. The argument escalated into a fight, and Browder was placed in solitary confinement. Around a quarter of the adolescent inmates at Rikers are in solitary confinement, which many claim is tantamount to torture. Certainly, in Browder's case, it was a harrowing experience. There is no air conditioning in the tiny cells, and he became despondent and desperate. Over the next two years, he entered solitary confinement six more times, and he became suicidal. He tried to kill himself twice in prison, once with a noose made of bedsheets, once with a shard of a plastic bucket.

In his third year of incarceration, Browder got a new, more sympathetic judge. During his court appearance, she offered to release him that day, on time served, if he would simply agree to a couple of misdemeanors. He refused, saying, "I did not do it." Later, at the prison, the other inmates thought he was nuts for refusing the plea bargain, but Browder was insistent that he was in the right: he wasn't going to admit to guilt if he was innocent.

Finally, on May 29, 2013, Browder's case was dismissed: his accuser had returned to Mexico. Kalief Browder was released in early June (Gonnerman, 2014).

Back at home, Browder exhibited classic signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. He found himself pacing, as he had in solitary confinement, and would lock himself in his room. Though he tried to date a few girls, they would always ask if he was in school or working. When he said he was at home, he reported that "They look at me like I ain't worth nothing. Like I ain't shit. It hurts to have people look at you like that." According to Browder, "In my mind right now I feel like I'm still in jail, because I'm still feeling the side effects from what happened in there (Gonnerman, 2014)."

In June 2015, almost exactly two years after his release, Kalief Browder committed suicide. The lingering effects of his incarceration had broken his mind, and he couldn't see a way through to a life worth living.

Ninety-five percent of those incarcerated in New York City are African American or Latino; that already astronomically high percentage rises when only youths are taken into account (O'Donohue, 2014). It is almost more likely than not that a Black boy from a low-income neighborhood, like Kalief Browder, will see the inside of a prison cell—even if he is demonstrably a decent student. And, as we saw in Browder's case, the results of a stint in prison are catastrophic.

There is a growing crisis in our country surrounding the incarceration of African American boys and men. The crisis is pervasive, and it is inextricably linked to the educational environment. Not only does an incarcerated adolescent boy lose months or years of education;

he is often so traumatized that he is unable to make his way in the world. Prison ends up teaching him what he knows about life, and when he gets out, he is likely to return to the cell. Recidivism rates are alarmingly high for Black boys who have been imprisoned. This crisis affects not only the boys themselves and their families; it also affects communities, whose young male workers are removed from the picture, and who must deal with the undereducated, disenfranchised, and disenchanted men who emerge from prison.

There are two leading reasons for the school-to-prison pipeline for Black boys. The first is a culture of educational discipline that treats kids as criminals. The second is endemic racism and greed in the American law enforcement and justice systems. In this chapter, we'll look at both these areas as well as solutions to the problems.

Putting Black Boys Away

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and Black males comprise the highest percentage relative to the overall population. Consider these statistics reported by the Civil Rights Data Collection organization:

- 70 percent of in-school arrests or students referred to law enforcement officers are Black or Latino
- 68 percent of males in federal and state prisons do not have a high school diploma
- 61 percent of the incarcerated population is Black or Latino—but only 30 percent of the U.S. population is from these demographics
- One out of three Black men will be incarcerated in his lifetime (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014)

Our public schools are supposed to be great equalizers, but the decks are stacked against Black boys from a young age. The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014) reports that Black students make up just 18 percent of preschoolers, but account for almost half of all preschool suspensions, and those statistics don't improve as students move up through the grades. Around 5 percent of White students are suspended or expelled at some point in their K-12 career, compared with 16 percent of Black students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Federal data indicate that Black students account for 15 percent of total K-12 students but make up over one-third of those students who are suspended once from school, nearly half of students who are suspended more than once, and over one-third of students expelled (ACLU, n.d.).

Sadly, over half of the Black young men who attend urban high schools do not earn a diploma. And of those dropouts, nearly 60 percent will go to prison at some point (Crotty, 2011). According to The Sentencing Project (2013), an organization that researches disparity in the justice system, one in three Black men will likely see the inside of a prison cell at some point in their lives.

Public schools have the potential to be great equalizers for our children and youth. We are aware that we have disadvantaged students in our midst, so why aren't we employing every tactic we have to combat those outside factors that are so detrimental? When we throw up our hands and say that Black boys can't be saved or that individual students are better off serving suspensions or expulsions than sitting in our classrooms learning, we are saying that we don't have power in the lives of our students. However, I think most rational educators would argue that is far from the truth.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Black boys are a student demographic that has been and continues to be, misunderstood in public school classrooms. Black boys' learning styles and social skills are often misconstrued as problems by educators. Those who have disadvantaged home lives are often accustomed to activity rather than sitting still and to shouting and argument as a means of communication. These do not translate well to the classroom. The result is that Black boys do not receive the most effective forms of discipline, lessons, and peer-interaction opportunities. Many are slipping through the proverbial cracks and not learning at their potential levels. That lack of learning leads to higher school dropout levels, higher rates of poverty, and ultimately, higher incarceration rates.

High school dropouts in all demographics have a higher likelihood of incarceration at some point in their lives. The reasons are myriad; however, one of the main issues is economic. A Black boy who drops out of high school simply does not have the educational background to land a high-paying job. He may wind up trying to make ends meet by engaging in petty crime. This may include thievery; it may include selling drugs. Increasingly, though, Black boys are incarcerated for acts that should not have put them in prison: for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, for talking back to an officer, for being suspected of smoking marijuana. Or, like Kalief Browder, they are simply unjustly incarcerated for crimes they did not commit. All too often, this unjust punishment has a basis in racism.

The school-to-prison pipeline indicates that there is a relationship between minority young men who are disciplined in K-12 settings through suspensions and expulsions and those who end up incarcerated later in life. Here are the alarming statistics:

- Black students are three times as likely to face suspensions as their White peers.
- Suspensions of Black high school students have increased 11 times more quickly than their White peers since the 1970s.
- Students suspended during their freshman year are two times as likely to end up dropping out of high school.
- Nearly 68 percent of all men in federal prison never earned a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

A study published by the University of Pennsylvania reports that Black students make up 39 percent of students suspended in Florida though they only account for 23 percent of the public school population in the state. The study notes that Black students are suspended and expelled more due to “unfair discipline practices” and appearing “disrespectful or threatening” (Smith & Harper, 2015).

Drilling down to the county level throws up even more dire statistics. In Orange County in central Florida, Black students represent 51 percent of the students suspended though they account for just 27 percent of the county’s public school population (Smith & Harper, 2015). And in the Chicago public school system, over a third of African American boys were suspended at some point during the 2013–2014 school year (Smith & Harper, 2015).

Eighteen percent of the nation’s public school students are Black, but an estimated 40 percent of all students who are expelled from U.S. schools are Black. This makes Black students over three times more likely to face suspension or expulsion than their White peers. When you add in Latino numbers, 70 percent of all in-school arrests are Black or Latino students. Match this to the 61 percent of the incarcerated population that is Black or Latino—even though these groups only represent 30 percent of the U.S. population when combined.

Approximately 250,000 teens are tried as adults every year, sometimes for minor offenses that stem from school scuffles. In North Carolina and New York, for example, all 16- and 17-year-olds are automatically tried as adults. Students led from school in handcuffs due to disruptive behavior are suddenly facing an adult record that puts them at risk of not getting into college or finding a stable job (Lynch, 2016). Almost always, the problems that led to their arrest are better suited for mediation within the school walls—an issue we'll look at later in this chapter.

As noted earlier, students who drop out of high school have a much higher chance of ending up in prison. The fact that Black students are suspended at much higher rates than their White peers points to a direct correlation between discipline in grade school and a place in a prison cell. Given the above, the fact that the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world is no surprise. The road to lockup starts in the public school systems—and it starts with unfair punishment.

Crime and Punishment

Sixty-nine percent of U.S. public schools reported at least one violent incident in 2015–2016, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), but that number rises to 82 percent for schools where Black students make up a majority. The violence is often associated with gang activity. Though Hispanic boys are the most likely to be involved in gangs at school, it is certainly an issue for Black boys as well: 31 percent of students nationwide reported seeing Black gang activity in their schools (NCES, 2018).

Gangs can wreak havoc in communities, but they should be viewed as a symptom rather than a disease. They represent an effort by the disenfranchised to find social stability—a social arena where the powerless can feel powerful. If you are a young Black boy from a broken home with no positive male role model to look up to and you feel beset on all sides by unjust cops, school administrators, and teachers, a gang looks extremely attractive. Gangs offer structure and camaraderie, and there is often the allure of wealth—however it is acquired. In other words, gangs offer these boys what the school should be offering: structure, companionship, strong leadership, and the chance to break out of poverty.

Plenty of violent and nonviolent crimes are committed by non-Black students, but those crimes tend to be underreported. It's also important to note that reporting standards for school crime may vary from school to school. This isn't to say that educators and administrators are not telling the truth in predominantly White schools; rather, based on other statistics, students of color tend to face harsher punishment for even the smallest offenses. Over and over, statistics show that punishment for Black boys—even first-time offenders—is harsher than for any other demographic.

Black boys taken from schools in handcuffs are not always violent, or even criminals. Increasingly, school-assigned law enforcement officers are leading these students from their schools' hallways for minor offenses, including class disruption, tardiness, and even nonviolent arguments with other students. It seems that it is easier to remove these students from class through the stigma of suspension or arrest than to look for in-school solutions. As Minnesota, civil rights attorney Nekima Levy-Pounds writes, "It is a continual affront to the human dignity of Black boys to be treated as second-class citizens within the public school system and made to feel as though they are not welcome in mainstream classroom settings" (Levy-Pounds, 2015).

When one student is causing a classroom disruption, the traditional way to address the issue has been removal—whether the removal is for five minutes, five days, or permanent. This is, of course, the easiest solution for the teacher. It is much less hassle to just take the student out of the picture than to work with him to ensure he is following guidelines. Separating the "good" and "bad" students has for decades been deemed a fair approach. On an individual level, this form of discipline may seem necessary to preserve the educational experience for others. If all children came from homes that implemented a cause-and-effect approach to discipline, this might be the right answer. Unfortunately, an increasing number of students come from broken homes or homes in which parents don't have the desire, time, or skills to discipline effectively. For these students, removal from education is simply another form of abandonment and furthers the lesson that they are not good enough to learn alongside their peers.

High-profile instances of school violence in recent years have led to a higher presence of law enforcement officers in public schools, often politely labeled "resource officers" or a similarly vague term. Of course, the presence of guns and other immediate danger items in schools are cause for arrest or at least temporary removal of the student, but the American Civil Liberties Union reports that children as young as five who are throwing tantrums have been removed in handcuffs by these officers (ACLU, n.d.). Recently, a mother in Flint, Michigan, was summoned to the school because her seven-year-old son had been causing problems. A policeman had been called to the classroom. When the boy's mother arrived, she found her son in handcuffs. Said the mother, “He don’t deserve to be in no handcuffs. . . . He ain’t here with no knife, he ain’t here with no gun.” Astonishingly, the police officer watching over the boy claimed not to have the keys to the handcuffs, and so the boy was forced to sit with his hands secured behind his back for over an hour while the mother tried to get him free (Gill, 2015). In Chicago, six-year-old Madisyn Moore was taken from her classroom by the school’s resource officer, handcuffed, and made to sit alone in a dark stairwell for taking candy from her teacher’s desk. When her mother arrived at the school to find her daughter in handcuffs, she was told by the officer that he was trying to “teach them to stop taking things that don’t belong to them” (Martinez, 2018. These sorts of incidents, which criminalize acting out or unruly classroom behavior, are becoming commonplace. They illustrate teachers’ lack of the skills needed to handle minor infractions in their classrooms. Rather than addressing the heart of the individual problems, it is easier for public schools to weed out troublesome students under the guise of protecting the greater good. Convenience triumphs over finding actual solutions. And convenience, these days, often involves a law enforcement officer.

The realities of school-related punishment and correlation to the criminal justice system are so great that President Obama’s administration released federal discipline recommendations in 2014 intended to keep kids in class and out of courtrooms. Among those recommendations was a complete overhaul of the way solitary confinement is used in prison settings, particularly when juveniles are in custody. Instead of solitary confinement, the president urged law enforcement to expand treatment for the mentally ill.

Also released that year was “The School Discipline Consensus Report” (Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014), which included strategies to keep students engaged and in classrooms and out of the juvenile justice system. An overview of the document released by the Council of State Governments Justice Center summed it up by saying:

> Although there are youth who engage in serious delinquent behavior for which referral to the juvenile justice system is appropriate, youth who commit minor offenses at school should typically not be referred to the courts. The long-term consequences for youth who make contact with the juvenile justice system include a greater likelihood of dropping out of school and future involvement with both the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. When youth are under juvenile corrections' supervision, they must have uninterrupted access to high-quality learning environments; provision of supports and services that meet these students' academic and special needs; and the facilitation of their seamless return to the classroom in their communities. (Morgan et al., 2014)

The Problem with Zero Tolerance

As a response to rising drug problems in high schools, "zero tolerance" policies began trending in the 1990s. They were intended as a way to enforce anti-drug policies but quickly became an all-encompassing way of life for school discipline. Though zero tolerance has been deprecated in some areas, many schools still implement the policy and use it as an excuse to remove students for minor infractions. When you couple these policies with a perceived rise in violent crimes inside schools and more armed officers present on K-12 campuses, it can spell disaster for students who may only need moderate behavior interventions to succeed in classrooms.

The term *zero tolerance* may sound like the best way to handle all offenses in public schools, but it is often catastrophic. Not every infraction is a black-and-white issue, and not every misstep by a student is a result of direct defiance. Often students with legitimate learning disabilities or social impairment are labeled as “disruptive” and removed from classroom settings under the guise of preserving the learning experience for better-behaved students. What becomes of these students? If they can avoid suspension or expulsion, they are often shunted into classrooms with other low-performing students, where the teacher is focused almost solely on discipline. They end up receiving a lower-class education.

Though ideology on problem students is slowly evolving, at present the removal process is the most widely accepted. Let’s look at what happens to those individuals who are suspended or expelled. I spoke with a friend who works as a counselor at a long-term juvenile facility in Indiana about what she sees every day. (She shared her insights but wants to remain anonymous.) She sees young men who have no expectations of improvement and therefore no motivation. She says this of the young men who come through her office:

> They have been given the message for several years that they are not allowed in regular school programs, are not considered appropriate for sports teams, and have had their backs turned on them because everyone is just tired of their behavior. . . . Why should they strive for more than a life of crime? (personal communication, March 2017)

She hit the nail on the head. Children are just as much a product of their environments as the expectations placed on them. Parents on a first-name basis with law enforcement officials certainly influence the behavior of their children, but school authorities with preconceived negative associations create an expectation of failure, too. Increasingly, educators are learning how to recognize the signs of textbook learning disabilities such as ADHD or dyslexia. But what about the indirect impact that factors such as poverty, abuse, neglect, or simply living in the wrong neighborhood have on a student’s ability to learn? Why aren’t we finding ways to identify the known risk factors for academic impairment and intervening earlier?

Students with Disabilities

Black boys with disabilities are the most often suspended and expelled demographic of all. A study released by UCLA's Civil Rights Project found that Black males with a disability had a 36 percent chance of suspension and that, in general, students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities (Abdollah, 2012). Most often, these students were suspended for minor infractions such as misbehaving in class or acting out in other ways.

Leroy Moore, Jr., an activist who is pushing back against the common practice of removing minority children from schools for behavioral issues, says that instead of police intervention, teachers simply need better training in handling behavioral issues. In a Q&A with the *Huffington Post*, Moore said:

> Too often, teachers and school administrators are willing to call the police to respond to behavioral issues that they should be trained to respond to without the use of law enforcement . . . This training should be reinforced with policy that directly outlines responses to certain behaviors and implements clear steps that must be taken before law enforcement can be called in. (Kiley, 2017, para. 2)

Moore contends that teachers are simply ill-equipped to handle the practical behavioral issues that stem from disabilities and says that, with better training, educators could diffuse situations in classrooms without outside help. In 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was amended to protect children with disabilities from being punished for acting in ways that aligned with their diagnosed disability. For example, zero-tolerance policies for behavior should not apply to students whose diagnosis includes typical behavioral problems that would otherwise be grounds for removal. Moore contends that many districts and individuals are simply ignoring this specification, and parents are not armed with the knowledge to fight back.

Inequality in Educational Access

Looking beyond the disciplinary ramifications of the school-to-prison pipeline, minority students have other disadvantages when it comes to reaching the high school graduation stage (remember, high school dropouts are more likely to end up incarcerated, even if they never encounter behavioral problems in K-12 settings).

Consider this: Black students tend to have fewer teachers who are certified in their degree areas. A U.S. Department of Education report found that in public high schools with at least 50 percent Black students, only 75 percent of math teachers were certified, compared to 92 percent in predominantly White schools. In English, the numbers were 59 and 68 percent, respectively, and in science, they were 57 percent and 73 percent (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

These numbers are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the disadvantages that take place in schools where children of color are the majority. When those children are boys, the outlook is even more dismal. Note that a substantial part of teacher training is dealing with the classroom and discipline issues. Teachers who do not have adequate training in their subject area are almost certain to lack the skills to implement effective disciplinary measures.

I taught elementary school for some years, and I can tell you that if you look in the face of any kindergarten student, you'll find innocence, unquenchable curiosity, and potential. However, more so than the grades that follow, kindergarten is a mixed bag of developmental, social, and academic levels. Some kids arrive with a few years of childcare and preschool under their belts, while others have never had a book read to them. The students who enter the kindergarten classroom are already products of their limited life experiences, but their public school classrooms are intended to be equalizers. In a perfect world, what has happened outside the classroom should not be a factor in the learning environment, and all students should have the same clean slate.

The current state of our public K-12 education system does not live up to that promise of equality, though. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often attend schools with fewer resources and less-qualified teachers. When their behavior is out of line with what is accepted as normal, they are removed from the classrooms and placed back into homes that are even less conducive to the learning process than their under-resourced schools. In theory, all students should have the same educational access, starting in kindergarten, but many minority students are already behind their peers from day one. As a result, these students fall behind their more advantaged peers and, without intervention, they struggle to keep up.

Why Care About the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

If you're reading this book, you are likely in the socioeconomic elite. You've probably completed at least high school and may have a degree or two under your belt. Why, you might ask, should the school-to-prison pipeline matter to you? Surely taking less-desirable elements out of the community has advantages.

Outside of caring about the quality of life for other individuals, which is something that is not teachable, the school-to-prison pipeline matters in more tangible ways. Though it has just 5 percent of the world's population, the U.S. has nearly a quarter of its prisoners. And, as we saw, African American men are unequally represented in that number. The average annual cost per prisoner across the U.S. is $31,286, though the figure is significantly higher in certain states (for example, the cost per prisoner in New York is over $60,000). The total annual cost of incarceration in the U.S. is an astounding 39 billion dollars (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012). Now, those are measurable costs. What isn't measurable is the indirect impact those incarcerations have on the economy considering those individuals who are not contributing to the workforce. Sure, we may pay the salary of prison employees or the CEOs of large prison privatization corporations, but we are missing out on the positive impact these individuals could have on our economy.

This is an American problem. It hurts everyone. If we want more high school graduates, less crime, and a more robust economy, we must stop punishing Black boys with school removals or disciplinary measures that don't match the offense.

Solutions

If Black boys don't succeed academically, without a strong support system, they can become disillusioned with school and feel as though the system is setting them up to fail. When schools don't do a good job of intervening and helping them get back on track, they unconsciously add another passenger to the school-to-prison pipeline. These students end up dropping out, and in many cases, are unable to sustain themselves economically even if they find a job. To survive, many may resort to criminal activity, which eventually lands them a revolving spot in the criminal justice system, a cycle that many never break. If they have children, the cycle repeats itself with the 2.0 version. How can we close the school-to-prison pipeline down for good? I have a few thoughts on that.

Early Intervention

If removal and zero-tolerance policies don’t help Black male students in the long term, what is the best way to discipline students when they do misbehave? The best answer is found long before the moment when discipline is necessary. Prevention and intervention tactics need a place in all teaching pedagogy, and those tactics must adjust for demographics and individual students. Schools need to offer robust programs for at-risk students that include mentoring from older students, after-school tutoring, and customized learning. If all of this sounds like a lot of work, that’s because it is. Technology is making the customized-learning portion much easier by enabling teachers to analyze student performance in a streamlined way long before problems arise. And as simple as it sounds, teachers must approach behavior problems with students in the same way they approach academic problems—with an analytical eye that looks for the best solution that will benefit everyone. Notice that I didn’t say the easiest or best for all the other students in the class; inclusiveness is often a difficult process. I said the best solution for *everyone*: the teacher, peers, and individual students. The benefits to keeping a child in the class, or at least in school, far outweigh kicking a child out of class or recommending suspension.

In-School Mediation

Zero tolerance should have no place in the American educational system. After all, isn’t it an American right to remain innocent until proven guilty? When children are immediately kicked out of schools and funneled into the criminal justice system, sometimes for minor infractions, we are essentially telling them that their reasons don’t matter. Keeping kids on school grounds and handling disciplinary matters in-house is preferable to removing them. School is where all American children belong—not the prison system.

Some local school districts are working to reverse the tide of zero tolerance through in-school mediation programs. The Los Angeles Unified School District is probably the best example of this in action. The district has implemented a stronger counseling referral program that keeps students inside school walls to work through infractions such as petty theft and vandalism rather than sending them through the juvenile justice system. Even the state of Texas, once known for its incredibly harsh zero-tolerance policies, has softened in recent years, passing a bill that encourages school administrators to weigh the options before referring kids to discipline outside the school walls.

These "common sense" approaches to student behavior problems are usually accompanied with training that addresses the root of the issue and attempts to resolve the conflict before any disciplinary measures are taken. The five core elements to commonsense approaches to in-school resolutions include relationships, respect, repair, responsibility, and reintegration. These initiatives are less about handing down punishment and more about empowering students to find solutions to what may be holding them back or causing them to act out. In this way, a more collaborative approach to resolution happens—holding students accountable while depending on teachers to go to these commonsense approaches first.

As the teaching profession evolves to be more tolerant of different learning styles, educators should also be trained in different approaches to behavior problems. Zero tolerance is a blanket policy that is simply too rigid to work for an entire student body. To put disciplinary policies in place that work for all students, teachers, and administrators must shift to a system that favors conflict resolution while eliminating the need for outside interference.

Instead of a zero-tolerance stance, more schools should encourage in-school mediation. Allow students to be themselves in an environment that facilitates getting to the root of the problem, instead of handing out disciplinary action.

Making Dropping Out More Difficult

Educators can certainly strive to reduce suspension and expulsion rates with better intervention and strategy. But what about the students who choose to walk away from their education when they drop out of high school?

In his essay "A Broken Windows Approach to Education Reform," *Forbes* writer James Marshall Crotty makes a direct connection between dropout and crime rates. He argues that if educators simply take a highly organized approach to keeping kids in school, it will make a difference in the crime statistics of the future. Crotty (2013) cites the effectiveness of states that refuse to extend driving privileges to high school dropouts or that don't allow athletic activities for students who fail a class. When higher stakes are associated with academic success, students will have more to lose if they walk away from their education. And the higher the education level of a student, the lower the risk of criminal activity, statistically speaking.

Restorative Justice

It's important to understand that the problematic behavior students demonstrate in school is rooted in what is happening in their lives outside the school walls. Therefore, reactions should not be to push children back out into that environment and expect them to fend for themselves. A restorative justice approach, which rehabilitates offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large, can go a long way towards keeping kids in class and out of the criminal justice system. This does not have to happen exclusively in classrooms. Community outreach programs that embrace youth and teach them peacemaking resolution strategies can improve the overall outcome for these students.

One organization that is implementing a restorative justice approach is the Community Organizing and Family Issues Peace Center on the north side of Chicago. The program is designed for older youth and is run from the public Wells Community Academy High School. The initiative taps parent facilitators who help students work through conflict resolution tactics. Students can ask to join the group or be referred by teachers based on behavior or at-risk status. This program is used in lieu of immediate suspensions or removal by law enforcement. An analysis of the program by Roosevelt University found that the students who participated in the program saw more success in academics and attendance (Morgan et al., 2014).

By working directly with students and teaching them how to work through conflict instead of simply removing them from it, restorative justice approaches teach life skills that are imperative for long-term peaceful members of society. Schools should work with community groups to enact programs like the Peace Center to keep students in classrooms but with better coping skills.

Fixing the Faulty Justice System

The story of Kalief Browder, which opened this chapter, caught the attention of the nation. In January 2016, President Obama used his story as an opener for an article in the *Washington Post* entitled “Why We Must Rethink Solitary Confinement,” in which he said, “The United States is a nation of second chances, but the experience of solitary confinement too often undercuts that second chance. Those who do make it out often have trouble holding down jobs, reuniting with family and becoming productive members of society" (Obama, 2016, para. 6). Following Browder's death, Obama commissioned a Justice Department review into the practice of solitary confinement and adopted a number of their recommendations, including "banning solitary confinement for juveniles and as a response to low-level infractions, expanding treatment for the mentally ill and increasing the amount of time inmates in solitary can spend outside of their cells."

President Obama's directive should be lauded, but much more needs to be done to tackle the incarceration of Black boys. First, financial incentives should be removed from the law enforcement and justice system. This may seem like a no-brainer, but it remains a deeply troubling aspect of the American way of doing justice. As an example, in 2009, two Pennsylvania judges, Mark A. Ciavarella, Jr., and Michael T. Conahan, were indicted in the so-called "kids for cash" scandal. The judges had taken more than two and a half million dollars in kickbacks from a private Pennsylvanian juvenile care facility. Because the facility was for-profit, its operators stood to gain financially if they received higher numbers of juvenile defenders. Judge Conahan had initially secured the contracts for the private facilities, in tandem with shutting down the state-run facility. Judge Ciavarella was involved in sentencing the juveniles. He was known to deliver unusually harsh sentences, sending youth to detention for issues as trivial as trespassing in an unused building and mocking a school employee on Myspace. He sent kids to detention at a vastly higher rate than did judges in other areas in the state (Urbina & Hamill, 2009).

Though judges Conahan and Ciavarella and the operators of the detention centers were indicted, the root of the problem is, of course, the privatization of the judicial system. Private, for-profit prisons make money based on the number of inmates they have. If inmates are a commodity, it is natural that the system will be abused.

A parallel issue is the for-profit nature of the law enforcement system. For example, in New York City, police officers are given quotas of the number of arrests and summonses they must make per month. As they are often sent to solidly African American neighborhoods, this amounts to racism. When some minority cops protested, they were "routinely denied overtime and vacation, demoted to menial posts and ultimately threatened with being fired for not making quotas" (Sauchelli, Rosario, & Leonard, 2015). Until this financial incentive to arrest Black boys is removed, it will become extremely difficult to lower the rate at which they are incarcerated. These are issues that will have to be tackled at the highest political levels.

Turning the Tide

Students who are at risk of dropping out of high school or turning to crime need more than a good report card. They need alternative suggestions on living a life that rises above their current circumstances. For a Black boy to truly have a shot at an honest life, he has to believe in the value of an education and its impact on good citizenship. That belief system has to come from direct conversations with trusted adults and peers about making smart choices. If we know how much less a high school dropout makes than peers with a diploma and peers with a college education, then we should tell all high school students that number. It's not enough to imply that dropping out of high school is a bad idea; students should have all the facts. For students who struggle socially or behaviorally in high school, schools should intervene with non-traditional options such as online courses. This is also true for students who feel the pressure to start earning a living early. The technology is already in place for all students, regardless of discipline issues or life circumstances, to earn a high school diploma. A college degree is nice too, of course, but the true key to ending the school-to-prison pipeline for Black boys is keeping them in classrooms instead of removing them and getting them across the stage to receive their high school diplomas. It will take an organized ideology shift and political will, but it’s possible, even in the next generation of Black male students.

Educators should approach students from disadvantaged backgrounds with more understanding and fewer preconceived notions. Behavior is a choice, but for students who have never seen the right way to act modeled or who are looking for that extra bit of attention in classrooms, bad behavior is an academic disadvantage. Instead of less time in classrooms, Black boys, and especially those with minor behavioral issues, should have more participation in the learning experience.

Chapter 7: Inadequately Trained Teachers (Obstacle 6)

Kyra Shugt felt called to be a teacher: She was ashamed that her home state of Minnesota had one of the largest achievement gaps in the country and wanted to do something about it. She had some teaching experience under her belt as a preschool teacher and part-time art teacher. Hoping to get a teacher’s license as quickly as possible, she enrolled in Teach for America’s 5-week summer program in Chicago.

At the TFA institute, she trained to be an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, but when she received her teaching practice placement, it was in sixth-grade mathematics. She hoped her final placement as a teacher would be in the ESL field for which she had received training, but that was not to be. She ended up at Bethune Elementary in Minneapolis, teaching fourth grade. Though she was excited to have a job, she soon realized she was hopelessly unprepared. “It was challenging,” she commented. “It was the hardest position I had ever taken on. I consider myself to be a dedicated teacher and just have a strong work ethic, but it was overwhelming (Regan, 2013, para. 8).”

Not only had Shugt ended up in a position for which she was not prepared, but she was also teaching in one of the worst-performing schools in the state. She noted that Bethune was “considered a lemon school. Students, mostly Black boys, from the district that are kicked out of other public schools are sent to Bethune.” About half of the teachers at Bethune were newbies like Shugt, and they were paired with more experienced mentors. Though Bethune was designated a Priority School and received extra funding and had smaller classes (there were just 14 students in Shugt’s fourth-grade classroom), teaching there was nevertheless an ongoing struggle.

In particular, Shugt felt unequipped to deal with the significant behavioral issues that cropped up on a daily basis. When fights broke out in the classroom, she would try to intervene but felt that her involvement was endangering her. Finally, in consultation with the school management, Shugt decided to leave the school in the middle of the year. “I loved the staff and the students,” she said, but “it just wasn’t the right fit. It was really hard to leave my students, but at the same time, it just felt like it was not in their best interest for me to stay” (Regan, 2013, para. 7). Kyra Shugt’s story may be extreme, but her experiences are all too common: undertrained teachers with little to no classroom experience are sent to some of the most difficult schools in the country. In the end, not only the teachers but the students and the parents are left hurting.

In this chapter, we will consider the true value of teachers—what they are worth to the education system and what difference quality teachers can make in the lives of all children, especially Black boys. Teachers are usually the stakeholders we hold accountable for transferring standards, knowledge, and skills to our students. And whether this accountability is fair, if teachers themselves are not adept at the transfer of knowledge and skills, then it hardly matters what sort of standards or curriculum an education system has developed.

We assume that teachers play a role in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. Part of being an effective teacher is having some insight into students—when they are excelling or likely to excel, when they are likely to need help, what sort of help they are going to need, and how they can make the most of their natural abilities. A lot depends on teacher quality. If teachers are not appropriately qualified and trained to meet these expectations and handle this responsibility, what is the price we end up paying? What is the consequence of this faux paux?

The simple reality is this: not all teachers entering the classroom, whether at the elementary or secondary level, have adequate training and experience to meet heightened expectations for minority students. Effective teachers are the best defense against the Black boy crisis because they can make up for many of the deficiencies with which Black boys enter school; however, we must be clear about what teachers need to do in the classroom. We must establish all our expectations, not just the ones that have the weight of officialdom. A strong teacher is an invaluable classroom tool although the education system has yet to define what constitutes a strong teacher. Certainly we have yet to figure out exactly how to produce strong teachers with any degree of consistency.

The challenge is to think about the qualification standards for teachers: What should they be able to demonstrate regarding academic training, professional training, and professional experience? We also must consider what it is that constitutes teacher competency—what practices should a teacher be able to implement in a classroom setting? What models for teaching should they be able to use? What should they know about culturally responsive teaching? Considering these and related questions about quality teaching, we can then begin to identify the nature and causes of problems that are undermining teacher quality.

Defining Teacher Qualifications

A core problem within the teaching profession is that too few professionals have the knowledge, skills, or even basic training to determine the best pedagogical practices for many typical classroom scenarios. When considering how to make the greatest difference in education quality, several researchers have concentrated on the importance of professional development.

A survey conducted by Edwards et al. (2006) concentrated initially on ascertaining how regularly teachers used specific strategies or techniques to plan for and accommodate individual differences in the classroom. When interviewers asked how often candidates' strategies related to diversity, inclusion, differentiated instruction, accommodations, and modifications in the classroom, most respondents indicated that they rarely employ instructional strategies to differentiate instruction, use tiered assessments, differentiate lessons using major concepts and generalizations, or use instructional materials to promote diversity (Edwards et al., 2006). Apparently, the focus was on the use of teaching materials rather than standard texts.

Teachers who participated in the survey by Edwards et al. (2006) used a relatively wide range of alternatives, including oral, visual, musical, and spatial materials; they also used cooperative and flexible grouping strategies and varying questions based on student readiness, interest, and learning styles. While these strategies go some way toward supporting students with atypical needs, the lack of focus on instructional strategies to differentiate instruction supports the idea that most teachers do not go far enough in their instructional approach. That is, they do not use instructional strategies to target students with diverse needs effectively. Their cut-and-paste, plug-the-hole solution is to use a range of learning materials to try to make up the difference. Unfortunately, transferring knowledge and skills to students often falls by the wayside.

More than this, it appears that most teachers do not have an adequate range of experience before undertaking a formal teaching position. Edwards et al. (2006) touch on this issue at some length in their study, citing the educational and training background of survey respondents. Most respondents were female, Caucasian, and university-educated via a traditional undergraduate program. Most had no prior teaching experience, and only 40 percent of the respondents said they had any specific teacher training. These findings lead one to question whether our current education and teaching models for student teachers are sufficient to prepare them for their jobs as teachers. Perhaps teaching, in general, is not a field we need to redesign but one we need to *redefine* to support the needs of diverse students, especially Black boys.

Reaffirming Teacher Hiring Standards

To identify qualified, appropriately trained teachers and ensure that they engage in continued education and training during their career requires that the education system adjust its hiring standards (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008). In fact, we may need to implement employment models that are different from the policies and models currently in place.

First, all teachers must be certified (Stronge, 2007). This would affect quite a significant number of existing teachers, of course. Second, teachers should be required to have experience and knowledge training in the subject or subjects they teach, especially at the high school level (Stronge, 2007). In other words, any mathematics teacher must have a degree in the field. The basic argument is that teachers must demonstrate that they can teach students the knowledge and skills and that they can teach them in the context of a broader, enriched curriculum—one that truly affords students a rounded education, rather than an education that teaches to tests (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008).

School districts must ensure that the teachers they hire have viable classroom experience and that they have the relevant theoretical knowledge to effectively problem solve, addressing the needs of all students in the classroom (Stronge, 2007).

Candidates should demonstrate a certain level of classroom experience and specific teacher training beyond their basic qualifications before they are eligible for employment in the public school system. This standard will help ensure that teachers have the necessary practical experience as well as the academic background to problem-solve and troubleshoot the needs of specific students, especially those who are struggling to learn the required material.

All teachers should receive a certain level of core education and training in instructional practices, classroom management, curriculum management, and the like. Although all teachers need not major in education, it makes sense to require a certain number of educational credits at an undergraduate level. Any teacher or prospective teacher of kindergarten or first-grade students should have academic training in early childhood development or elementary education. Being able to understand and track the development of children between the ages of five and eight is critical to kindergarten and first-grade teachers, who are charged with helping to identify students who are struggling with some aspect of their development and are, therefore, at risk of being held back.

Teachers working in higher grades need to demonstrate a certain level of formal education in their specialty as well as in the art and science of education. But some degree of familiarity with child development and psychology is necessary for teachers who work with students in the upper grades to ensure that they are sufficiently alert to students whose academic struggles suggest they may need additional support. Teaching certification should be a requirement for public school teaching as it provides some means of assessing the individual teacher’s commitment to their work and their preparedness to invest in the work they are doing. That way, we can ensure that all students, especially those that come from disenfranchised backgrounds, have access to a quality education.

Addressing the Issue of Teacher Competence

Beyond establishing specific teacher qualifications and training required for their specialties, we must also define teacher competence apart from any credentials they may have. We must address the issue of general teaching competence because even a considerable amount of academic and professional training does not ensure that teachers have the competence necessary to meet raised expectations for student learning.

Core Teacher Competencies

Let’s examine the minimum competencies that K–12 teachers need in order to be successful:

- **Enthusiasm.** A teacher’s level of enthusiasm about what they are teaching is arguably the single most important competency. If the students perceive that the teacher is bored, then boredom will ripple through the classroom. When researching his book *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light (2008) interviewed many college students, asking about their education, inspirations, and drive to study and continue learning. Light reported that, regardless of their social or cultural background, race, or discipline, the most common aspiration among students was that the class they were taking would help them progress; that is, it would stretch them and change them in some way (2008). The teacher’s challenge is to inspire students and help them achieve their aspirations.
- **Positive Attitude.** It is very important for teachers to be optimistic and foster a positive attitude within themselves and their students. The French philosopher Voltaire said, “the most courageous decision one makes each day is the decision to be in a good mood.” I couldn't have stated it any better myself. Our educational system does not need teachers who are always looking at the glass as being half empty. What it needs are role models

with positive attitudes who view obstacles as opportunities, not harbingers of doom and despair. All the effective teachers that I have known had this attribute, and it ultimately rubbed off on the rest of my classmates and me.

In order to display a positive attitude, teachers must listen to what they say to others and to their tone of voice. Teachers should display care, concern, and respect. Lastly, when the going gets tough, people with positive attitudes rise to the occasion and work on solving problems, not making them worse by their own pessimism.

- **Knowledgeable About the Subject.** A teacher must be sufficiently knowledgeable about his or her subject (Stronge, 2007). They should to be able to analyze all the elements of a subject, to challenge its theories and fundamentals, and have a detailed awareness of all its implications, social biases, and possible uses. Education experts have often argued that all elementary teachers should have a proven, broad, and detailed knowledge of all the subjects they will be expected to teach, and that high school teachers should be experts in their field; they need a university-level specialization or a college major in the subject they teach.
- **Knowledgeable About the Curriculum.** Teachers must have a clear idea of how to teach their subject in the most effective manner (Stronge, 2007). A teacher might be an expert in his or her field and convey positive energy in his or her instruction, but if a teacher starts teaching concepts relating to quantum physics before students have a good notion of what an atom is, students will inevitably be lost or bored, or they will quickly lose confidence in their abilities. By the time a teacher has reached an expert level in his or her field of study, he or she may well have forgotten the exact learning steps taken to get there, thus the subject curriculum will play a crucial guiding role. The curriculum

outlines the structure and the layers of learning, which are developed along a defined course of time. Teachers must know exactly what they will be asking their students to study and when as well as which the previous layer of knowledge is being built on.

- **Knowledgeable About Pedagogical Content.** Teachers must be knowledgeable about the methods they can and will use to convey their knowledge (Stronge, 2007). This is known as pedagogical content knowledge; that is, it is what binds subject knowledge. Pedagogical content knowledge might be viewed as a profound understanding, interpretation, and adaptation of the curriculum. It refers to the way the teacher organizes the topics, issues, and learning points and chooses the clearest analogies and metaphors in order to leave an impact on his or her students. Pedagogical content knowledge enables teachers to bridge the gaps in the students' knowledge in order to transmit their points clearly and profoundly and to foresee misunderstandings and problems that may arise. He or she must know how to address these issues with clarity and confidence and to make the right choices in his or her methods, according to the student's interests, situations, and backgrounds. For example, the teacher might use the analogy of a microscopic city in order to explain the functions and happenings within a cell, where the nucleus is described as the city mayor or the decision maker, and the cell membrane as the city wall, which acts as a border and allows some things to leave, and others to enter. This analogy facilitates learning because it creates a conceptual image in the minds of the students, catalyzing comprehension and retention of the lesson.
- **A Good Classroom Manager.** Strong teachers are expected to be in control of the class, showing total confidence in their position. Good classroom management skills are crucial if successful learning is to take place in a classroom, which is full of social networks,

peer pressure, competition, emotional complications, and varying degrees of confidence (Stronge, 2007). Children and teenagers need the freedom to make their own decisions, to follow their own interests and paths, and to develop their own personalities, but they also need limits. Good classroom management allows space for all these elements, creating a safe, stable, and stimulating environment.

Teachers will find that one of the most frustrating parts of teaching is classroom misbehavior. Misbehavior is easy to identify; however, finding solutions to deal with the causes effectively may be more difficult. Good classroom managers get to the root cause of problem behavior as soon as possible because misbehavior will continue, and may get worse, if not dealt with effectively (Moore, 2008). Teachers should have the ability to take a close look into students' behaviors to find the influential factors that are shaping their behavioral patterns. Teachers should be aware of the disciplinary standards of their school and apply them fairly and consistently (Stronge, 2007).

- **Ethical.** Teachers should be wholeheartedly committed to their code of ethics. Cochrane-Smith & Zeichner (2005) stress that this code may have been provided by the school, but it is important for teachers to develop their personal code of ethics and to hold themselves accountable for adhering to their chosen standards. Teachers should be able to reflect this commitment in their day-to-day teaching. Ethical educators are expected to treat every student with the same respect, commitment, and engagement, embracing the opportunity to be practical models of virtue, to actively engage in the growth and learning of each individual student, and to be unlimited by external factors such as class and race.

Teachers must take responsibility for their own development—try new ideas, be imaginative, talk to other teachers, and stay up to date with the latest theories and research regarding education and effective teaching (Moore, 2008). If students seem to be making too little progress, teachers must swiftly adapt their method, change their teaching theory, and seek new ways to transmit the message. Continuous professional development should be seen as a personal investment in one's teaching career, enabling them to remain up to date with the latest teaching practices. For instance, technology can offer new and innovative ways to make classroom management easier, but it is up to the teacher to be cognizant of rapidly changing devices and systems.

In various aspects of our lives, a large gap seems to exist between the theory and the practice of an activity. Just as experienced drivers will tell learners that "you don't start learning how to drive until you've passed your test," many experienced teachers have a similar attitude about the theories of teaching they studied in college versus the reality of standing in front of a class and actually *teaching*. This is one of the reasons that university teacher education programs have increased the number of time students spend performing fieldwork and engaging in the real classroom atmosphere early in their educational career. Newly hired teachers will undoubtedly need practical solutions to problems, and these are often learned more quickly and effectively through experience. Teachers should have a deep passion and respect for the progress of their own profession, as much for themselves and the students as for the profession (Lynch, 2017).

Adapting Strategies for Black Boys

For Black boys and other at-risk populations to succeed, teachers will need to go beyond core competencies and develop flexible teaching strategies to promote student success. For example, they should be able to gauge when it is appropriate to employ optional instructional strategies. Teachers should be able to facilitate cooperative learning, mastery learning, direct instruction, adaptive education, individualized instruction, peer tutoring, and curriculum-based assessments as instructional strategies whenever appropriate. In addition to identifying and implementing specific teaching strategies to support individual learning needs, teachers should be able to make sound judgments about strategies from the available range. The best teachers should recognize those measures that would be most effective at supporting students and inspiring them to be accountable for their education.

Because of the importance of home-to-school communications, teachers must be good communicators. They must be able to engage parents as well as students, and they should encourage parents to support their children while also addressing potentially sensitive issues with them. Positive social-communication and interpersonal skills are also important competencies. Teachers should be comfortable and competent at encouraging student responsibility and self-evaluation. Beginning as early as first grade, teachers should encourage students to undertake self-grading. Teachers shouldn’t accept classwork until both teacher and student have agreed on its quality.

Traditional teachers seem primarily concerned with having students memorize the right answers, demonstrate proper grammar, and focus on correct form rather than devote time to developing original ideas, either in classroom discussion or student writing. This is where traditional teaching fails Black boys because this approach simply encourages them to do what they need (and often *only* what they need) to survive in school. Too often, the unspoken goal of traditional teaching is simply to escape retention or social promotion by keeping grades above failing.

In-service teachers report being unhappy about the frequent carelessness, unkindness, and even cruelty of schoolchildren (Lynch, 2017). Therefore, knowing how to teach children skills for healthy relationships and conflict resolution is crucial to successful academic teaching as well as moral teaching. Part of the challenge of teaching healthy relationships lies in knowing how to create a different power dynamic within the classroom.

Effective Teachers as Deterrents to Academic Failure

Given their centrality to the student's learning experience and the management of education, it is obvious why effective teachers form the most important deterrent to academic failure. With qualified, competent teachers, most students exhibiting learning difficulties should nonetheless be able to achieve enough academic progress to warrant advancement to the next grade (Capper & Frattura, 2009).

Indeed, this conclusion suggests the need for some internal streaming within grade levels. For instance, students struggling with literacy or math skills could be streamed into a separate classroom either for a specific grade or for learning a specific subject. With this flexibility, the teacher could focus on addressing specific challenges experienced by the individual learner—essentially teaching to the student—to interpret standards and expectations for the student and to play to their strengths and target their weaker areas for development (Capper & Frattura, 2009).

The most successful attempts to teach for intelligence entail several basic assumptions. First, teachers must acknowledge that traditional methods of teaching are not always wrong (Kridel, 2010). Many high-achieving students thrive under the traditional approach to teaching, and many typical students or low-achieving students can improve under a more traditional teaching focus. The key is that traditional methods are inadequate for many students who are less achievement-driven (Ornstein & Levine, 2008). Because all students are expected to learn a specific curriculum, it is important that all students have the opportunity to be taught in a manner that enriches their learning. This applies to high achievers as well as to those who struggle academically. When faced with a less motivated student, however, a teacher must be able to develop a strategy that targets that student's needs (Capper & Frattura, 2009). Teachers must have a greater repertoire of methods.

More than this, best teaching practices should concentrate on building new theories of intelligence. We do not have space in this volume to elaborate on specific theories, but it is appropriate to acknowledge Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, Robert Sternberg's theory of successful intelligence, Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, and Reuven Feuerstein's theory of structural cognitive modifiability (Kridel, 2010).

Second, the public education system should encourage teachers to regard the process of teaching as a strategic act of engagement, consistent with new theories of intelligence that identify active engagement of students' minds as a prerequisite for learning (Gouwens, 2009). By regarding teaching as a strategic act, teachers can design lessons and units that integrate a variety of strategies with targeted content so that each student develops the required skills (Capper & Frattura, 2009). In practical terms, we are talking about the act of differentiating instruction, which includes creating a personalized learning path for each student. This approach is based on the notion that each student is different and has different learning needs. To help students master the materials, teachers must satisfy these needs. Doing so creates an increased workload for teachers but results in higher rates of academic achievement for students (Lynch, 2017).

Third, teachers must understand that it takes more than a review of theoretical information to change teaching practices. Continuing education for teachers is crucial, but it must include more than theoretical discussions (Kridel, 2010). Teachers need opportunities to learn and apply new teaching strategies in the classroom, with guidance to ensure that best practices are achieved. In other words, the education system should develop scenarios that provide teachers with regular practical training in addition to theory-based continuing education instruction.

Finally, teachers must also be aware that changing their teaching style or otherwise enhancing it will require, in most instances, that students also change their learning styles. Indeed, when teachers encounter students who are struggling academically, the need to change learning styles may be very immediate. It should, however, be recognized that changing learning styles can be extremely challenging for students. When teachers are making changes in their teaching, they should be aware that the change process has equally significant ramifications on the students' side of the desk (Gouwens, 2009). For instance, beginning from an abstract, theoretical point of view and using that to construct a framework or big picture may work in some classroom scenarios. On the other hand, starting with a hands-on classroom test of a new method may be the best approach as it will allow students to be involved in the subsequent evaluation.

As deterrents to academic failure, effective teachers function as the most immediate asset available to the education system (Capper & Frattura, 2009). They are tasked with identifying at-risk students early and bringing the best education and teaching strategies to bear. The teacher's insight and response can help at-risk students to master the knowledge and skills needed to meet standards for graduation. To properly fill this role, teachers need regular training updates, access to research information, and access to networking opportunities.

Solutions

For students to successfully matriculate from kindergarten through to graduation, they must be mentored and instructed by hundreds of quality educators along the way. If there is a weak link in any part of the chain, it will break, and could potentially derail a student's progress. For this reason, providing students with access to quality teachers seems like a no-brainer. Well, not exactly. For Black boys and other groups who attend public schools in the U.S., being assigned to a high-quality teacher is akin to winning the lottery. In other words, it doesn't happen that often. If we are serious about ending the Black boy crisis, then we must do everything we can to provide them with good teachers. We already know that Black boys are more likely to attend schools that are underperforming and filled with teachers who function more like babysitters. Now, we must do something about it. So how do we go about providing all students, not just Black boys, with access to quality teachers? I am glad you asked. Here are my thoughts.

Reaffirming Teacher Hiring Standards

The idea of identifying qualified, appropriately trained teachers, and then ensuring that they engage in continued education and training during their career, requires adjustments to hiring standards and implementation of employment models that may be different from the policies and models currently in place. One very basic change would require that all teachers be certified. This would affect quite a significant number of existing teachers, of course, but it would be a beginning to declaring a new standard for teaching knowledge and experience. A second needed change is the requirement that teachers have experience and specific knowledge training in the subject or subjects they teach, especially at the high school level.

In other words, any teacher who is teaching mathematics must have a degree in the field. The basic argument is that teachers must demonstrate that they can teach students the knowledge and skills and that they can teach them in the context of a broader, enriched curriculum, one that truly affords students a rounded education, rather than an education that teaches to tests. School districts have to ensure that the teachers they hire have viable classroom experience and also that they have the relevant theoretical knowledge to be able to effectively problem solve, addressing the needs of all students, especially Black boys, in the classroom.

Mentoring

Not only do students need mentoring, but teachers need this support as well. At the beginning of this chapter, we looked at the story of Kyra Shrugt who experienced difficulties in her first year of teaching and eventually dropped out. Now let's look at another story; this one features a young teacher named Josie (her name has been changed).

Like Kyra Shrugt, Josie felt called to teach. She had worked with children supervising museum visits and had enjoyed that experience so much she decided to become a teacher. After getting her master's in education, she completed two years of fieldwork and (unlike Kyra) felt prepared to teach. Like Kyra and like many beginning teachers, Josie experienced difficulties during her first year of teaching. She was working long hours—spending more than 12 hours a day at school, which didn't include the hours of preparation—and began to get stressed out. She comments:

> I was unfamiliar with the resources available to me and how to access them. The teacher who had my classroom before me left behind a wealth of books, guides, and programs, but the amount was overwhelming, and I had little direction. Instead, I planned everything from scratch. Everything I did was homemade, the night before (Regan, 2013, para. 2).

As she worked around the clock, including on weekends, she wondered if she could continue to do the job. She remembered that fully half of the new teachers quit before they completed five years of teaching and wondered if she would be among them. Eventually, Josie used a search engine to seek help and discovered a resource called the New Teacher Center. She hooked up with a mentor who advised her to keep one day of each weekend free. The mentor met with her weekly, and they worked together on ways to structure her days and allow student work to guide her instruction. Josie says,

> Because of my mentor, I have been able to feel a sense of control, which has allowed my creativity to flourish. I know where to plug in great ideas, and I can come up with engaging ways to teach, now that I have a better sense of what to be teaching! I have someone to go to for guidance. I don’t feel alone anymore. (Moir, 2012, p. 159)

Mentoring works. It should be standard for all new teachers, for at least the first two years.

Adequate Support

Far too often, teachers feel like they are floundering when it comes to dealing with behavioral issues, grading loads, and racial differences in the classroom. It is imperative that all teachers have someone in the leadership structure that they can go to when they feel stressed out or come upon a situation that they feel unable to deal with. The support personnel should have the time to sit with the teacher and adequately listen and respond to the problem. They should never be dismissive; rather, they should work on creating a positive future for both the children in the classroom and the newer teacher.

The support personnel, particularly in areas where teachers and students are from different racial backgrounds, should be aware of those racial differences and the options for tackling racism and bullying. They should also have the tools of restorative justice on hand and encourage teachers to use those tools rather than attempt to punish misbehavior.

Conclusion

The stories of Kyra and Josie, which bookended this chapter, indicate that anyone in a support role for children in the public education setting should have the appropriate academic background and practical training to fulfill their job description. Their qualifications and training should align with their job experience. Individuals working as reading specialists must have the academic knowledge and specific training in literacy. Anyone serving in the capacity of a special educator should have a similar level of knowledge and training in their area. School counselors, too, should have a standard of knowledge and training and be able to demonstrate a practical readiness to problem solve and apply support solutions for individual students, rather than relying on cookie-cutter models. And mentors can be enormously influential for teachers at the beginning of their careers.

Of course, it is the school districts and the schools themselves that must ultimately enforce these standards in their hiring practices. The benefits of doing so are immense, potentially solving the Black boy crisis, for starters, and ultimately producing better-educated, well-rounded graduates of the public education system.

Chapter 8: Ineffective Assessments (Obstacle 7)

Ankur Singh, a former student at the University of Missouri–Columbia, took an English class in his junior year of high school that influenced him profoundly. “It was the only class I’ve ever taken where the lessons I learned will carry with me for the rest of my life, and after completion, I felt ten times smarter (Strauss, 2012).” he says. The teacher focused on the development of the students’ critical thinking skills and ensured that they were able to analyze poems and essays. He was keen to allow each student to form his or her own opinions.

Because Singh loved the junior-year English class so much, he expected the college-prep AP English course he enrolled in during his senior year would be equally enjoyable. However, it turned out to be an awful experience. The critical thinking skills he had honed the previous year were of no use in the new class; instead, the course focused solely on preparing students for the inevitable exam. “It frustrated me to no avail, and I ended up doing very poor in AP English,” Singh says. “And I found the exact same thing in all of my other AP classes, which seemed more focused on college preparation and standardized tests rather than genuine learning (Strauss, 2012).” Singh began to wonder what the real purpose of education was. He says,

> All around me were students studying diligently, stressing out about their grades, homework, the ACT, college essays, AP tests. And here I was not caring about any of those things. Were there really no students in this school who wanted anything more than just a college degree and a job? (Strauss, 2012)

He began to feel lonely, and then angry. Finally, during an AP French exam, he used the time to write a furious letter to the College Board, expressing his misgivings. Though he expected to be reprimanded by his French teacher for writing a letter rather than taking the exam, she listened sympathetically and told him that she felt the same frustrations with the system. Though she had wanted to take the French students on field trips to a French bakery or watch a French film, she was forced to teach to the test. “Maybe if the students themselves spoke out against it,” she said, “it could all change (Strauss, 2012).”

As Ankur Singh’s story demonstrates, the current model of assessments can lead to frustration in students and teachers alike. In this chapter, we will look at the use of effective assessment measures in determining a student’s abilities and academic potential, especially when it comes to Black boys.

In the U.S. public school system, there is a lot of talk of “accountability.” Teachers are held accountable for what their students do or do not know. Administrators are taken to task if standardized test scores are too low or drop from one year to the next. State lawmakers are asked to correct any “crisis” of underperforming students through legislation. When it comes to the progress and success of our K-12 students, the ball is constantly being passed, until some course of action is put in place that will presumably fix whatever academic woe is perceived in a particular school, district, or state.

One major way that this accountability is enforced is through standardized testing. By applying the same requirements to each teacher and student within a state, the general theory is that accountability for student success will be upheld. Truly understanding what our students are learning is more complicated than that, though. We also measure the success of K-12 systems in the U.S. through graduation rates and through college acceptance and graduation numbers. These only tell part of the story, though. Presumably, handing someone a diploma means that a person has mastered the required material and “knows” what is needed to earn the graduation distinction. The dismal state of today's K-12 assessments is one of the biggest reasons why Black boys are in crisis.

We know that American students lag behind other developed countries when it comes to math and science achievement. Students in South Korea and Singapore, for instance, consistently outrank U.S. students when it comes to basic and advanced math and science course achievements. Survey after survey of business leaders bemoan the lack of basic writing and communication skills their employees possess (Nolop, 2013), and on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 27 percent of 12th-graders were proficient in writing (Leal, 2012). This number was even lower for Black boys (12th-graders), with only 15 percent of them scoring at the proficient level in writing (Leal, 2012)

If we wait until students are done with K-12 learning to figure out whether they are learning what they need to know, we will be too late. Assessments throughout the K-12 journey are necessary, but how those assessments are administered is one of the most hotly contested issues surrounding the K-12 system today.

The "teaching to the test" mentality has become the bane of every K-12 educator's existence. Even teachers who are strongly opposed to such a narrow way of educating students find that staying within a narrow realm of material becomes a necessity in the contemporary classroom. Increasingly, the worth of teachers is derived solely from student performance results—specifically, the results of standardized testing. Often, the entire value of what a teacher does in a classroom during a given year and how teachers performed in prior years boils down to what a statewide blanket test spits out in the way of student results. While benchmarks for grade levels have merit, the methodology for administering and weighting assessments in today's K-12 public schools is ineffective and unfair to the teachers who must adhere to them. To hedge their bets, many teachers have resorted to spending the bulk of their time helping students who are more likely to pass the upcoming standardized assessments. Groups such as students with special needs and Black boys often do not fall into this category and usually get left behind. Sad, but true.

Frances Banales, who is president of the Tucson Education Association, highlights the stresses involved in teaching to the test. The stress, she says, emerges from “the idea that we are not doing what’s best for kids.” She adds:

> The anxiety can lead you to question the profession you are dedicated to . . . You’re testing, not instructing. You have to draw on all your strength. There’s a lot of preparation a teacher has to do to administer the test. You have to present a calm, supportive atmosphere (Overman, n.d.).

According to Banales, the stresses surface in various ways. Some teachers shut down, becoming more robotic in their teaching. Some talk more, while others show their stress by becoming quieter. She notes that some teachers don’t eat enough during the weeks of testing, and the stresses inevitably affect the teachers’ home lives: “You have to do so much that you end up not having time for your personal family life. You have to get everything in; you’re trying to prioritize really.” And, of course, it is not only the teachers who are stressed. Students as well are under tremendous pressure to succeed. As Banales notes: “They give up. They may literally not read through the [test] questions. They get angry or sick. They act out” (Overman n.d. “Signs of Stress” section, para. 1). Although all students suffer from the effects of test anxiety, Black boys, who are already behind the eight ball, can ill afford to give the school system a chance to prove that they are the weakest link in the chain.

Despite the qualms with the basics of standardized testing, many educators view it as a necessary evil of the improvement process. More cynical educators view it as a completely useless process that is never a true indicator of what students know. Proponents of K-12 assessments say that without them, there is no adequate way to enforce educator accountability and to truly ascertain whether students are learning what they should know at each level. Critics say that assessments put too much focus on a narrow span of information and force teachers to teach to the test, thus leading to rampant anti-intellectualism. Is rote memorization a true test of the knowledge of students? If teachers are given too much freedom, will students acquire the basic knowledge? These issues need to be addressed to build a stronger educational system in the U.S., and consequently end the Black boy crisis.

Where Assessments Stand Today

Assessments of K-12 students are state-developed and -mandated at this point, but there is still plenty of federal oversight. While the federal government cannot tell a state what exactly to cover in an assessment, it can make certain subjects and benchmarks more attractive. Federal funding for certain programs is tied to assessment scores in areas such as math or science learning. Thus, the states that choose to include federally friendly standards do so, at least partially, with financial incentives in mind. States are rewarded based on the students who achieve standards in areas that the federal government sees as priorities.

Having national standards is not the problem; incentivizing those standards is. We all learn from a young age that every person is unique and that no two people are alike. Educators learn that students have different learning styles and different strengths when it comes to those learning styles. As a nation established on the principles of individual liberties and life goals, we should be especially open-minded when it comes to nuances among the students in public schools. However, this isn’t necessarily the case. We can’t seem to understand that a Black boy growing up in the housing projects of an urban city will not have access to the same quality education as a White student living in a suburban part of the city.

Assessments seem to take these basic ideas and throw them out the window, blanketing all students with a set of standards to which they must adhere. Not only must students all be on the same page when it comes to learning, but their teachers must treat them as one when it comes to the education process. Based on ideology alone, standardized assessments are flawed. When they are then put into practice, their weaknesses are revealed. How can all students be measured with the same yardstick, and how can punishments and rewards be handed out using such a scale? How can you administer an assessment to a homeless child who is experiencing extreme hunger because they haven’t eaten since lunch the day before? Or to a Black boy who only managed to get two hours of sleep the night before because of intermittent gunshots emanating from outside his window? How on earth do you assess students who live in such harsh environments?

Enter Common Core Standards. No education policy and reform on a national scale has received more attention and vitriol than the Common Core Standards, which have been implemented in over 40 states. Though Common Core benchmarks were developed through a consortium of states, their perceived association with national politics is heightened. The basics of Common Core standards are more critical thinking requirements, a higher emphasis on math and science proficiency, and better career-readiness initiatives in all pursuits (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.).

These standards are, naturally, assessed through standardized testing. In the case of Common Core, it is through the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing. The results are used to determine progress and outline areas for improvement in K-12 schools. Every educational initiative should be examined and weighed based on its contribution to the future college and career goals of the student at hand. The lingering question then becomes this: Are learning experiences not directly related to college placement and career advancement irrelevant? (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.).

The standards-based Common Core approach to education reform has already been attacked for its disconnection to what kids should know and what they are simply required to regurgitate for the sake of a test—*déjà vu* from the early days of NCLB. Parents who see their children struggling with the heightened intensity of the standards have taken to social media and blogs to complain, and conservative groups that believe states are overstepping their educational power have petitioned their governors to withdraw their states from the standards. There is plenty of misinformation floating around about Common Core standards, their origination, and states' roles in administering them. To understand what these standards and any future standards with a national push mean, we first have to know exactly what they are.

Contrary to what many may think, Common Core standards were not developed by the federal government or any particular presidential administration. Common Core standards are the creation of the Governors' Association and were developed with input from many states before they were finalized. From there, states could decide whether to implement the standards or not—there was never a mandate to accept them. Nearly every state was on board to implement Common Core standards when they were first released. However, some states have since lost that fervor, with Indiana being the first one to go back on its original decision and opt out of Common Core after just one year of its implementation. South Carolina and Oklahoma quickly followed suit. The reasons behind these flip-flops were obscure. Officially, the governors of these states said they decided to go with standards that better addressed the needs of their specific student bodies. Unofficially, critics of the governors' moves said they were simply political actions intended to gain favor with constituents who were anti-Common Core, and particularly those who felt that the standards were associated with President Obama although they never were (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.).

Regardless of why states decided against Common Core, either at the outset or after implementation, they remain in the majority of classrooms across the country. So, what exactly are the Common Core benchmarks, and why are they viewed as being so groundbreaking and controversial? In a nutshell, the Common Core standards put a stronger focus on areas in which American students typically fall behind: math, science, and engineering. They set a higher bar for learning in these areas and in language arts and critical thinking. And while the federal government played no implementation role, it did back the standards to the point of offering financial incentives for states that adopted them (Race to the Top is an example of this). By agreeing to the standards set forth by Common Core, states were, in essence, agreeing to the nationalization of learning benchmarks for the betterment of the K-12 student population as a whole.

How Common Core Affects Black Boys

Let's look at how Common Core affects Black boys. Black boys are more likely than any other student group to grow up in impoverished, high-crime neighborhoods. It's hard to concentrate on your studies, when you could be killed by a stray bullet on the ride or walk to school. They are more likely to be born into households where parents are forced to work two or three jobs, just to make ends meet. It's hard to do your homework when no one is available to help you. The kicker is that they are more likely to attend underperforming schools, taught by inexperienced teachers who are there just to collect a paycheck. It's hard to stay motivated to learn when you don't have the tools or support that you need to be successful.

Setting the bar high for all children is a good thing, but to do so, without providing them with the tools and resources they need to reach that bar is not only disingenuous, but criminal. In fact, implementing Common Core without creating a plan to help marginalized groups such as Black boys succeed is setting them up for failure, and in a way, starting the school-to-prison pipeline in elementary school.

Universal Problems with Common Core

Setting uniform standards for students from South Dakota to New York City sounds like a smart plan in theory. To compete in the future world economy, American students need to master certain subject areas and be on the same page with them. The standardization of learning also helps feed the college system more readily, ensuring that students are learning at a heightened level and not being taught remedial skills that should have been mastered before high school graduation. However, as noted earlier, the way that these blanket standards are measured for effectiveness is through assessments. Once again, each state has its brand of assessments, but those that have adopted Common Core standards must adhere to a heightened level of questioning.

The problems with Common Core standards and their accompanying assessments lie below the surface and reflect the larger problem with K-12 testing in America. No two students are the same. When you factor in things like environmental and socioeconomic differences as well as regional environments, there is no way that any one curriculum standard or set of tests can cover an entire nation of K-12 learners (or even a majority of them, based on the states that have adopted the standards). Assessments turn living, breathing students into machines, who must be programmed to spit out the right answers at the right time to further the value of an American education.

Common Core standards singlehandedly thrust the issue of what should be learned and how that material should be tested into the national spotlight again. While educators had never abandoned this discussion and likely never will, the public seemed to awaken abruptly and passionately when confronted with the topic of what K-12 students should be learning. This has set the stage for a thorough reimagining of assessments in U.S. classrooms and has presented an opportunity for public support of change. So where do we start? In the sections that follow, we will discuss strategies that can be used by education professionals to develop future assessments and focus these assessments on what matters most: student learning. This will help all students reach their potential and help end the Black boy crisis. How? Because if we can improve the way we instruct and assess students, the positive effects will trickle down to Black boys.

Greater Focus on How to Obtain Knowledge

In this digital age, there is more information available than can ever be processed, and the way that students vet this data is incredibly important. While the Internet has opened up the world in amazing and beautiful ways, it has also skewed the way information is obtained. Instant knowledge, or perceived knowledge, is available as soon as kids are old enough to type in a password or swipe a screen. The Internet has eliminated the information exploration process in many ways, with its search engine providers racing to spoon-feed people the exact answers they need with the fastest speed.

For those who grew up in the pre-Internet days, the idea of simply Googling the answer for our homework is mindboggling. However, a Black boy born today will likely be the star of an entire Facebook photo album before he is even one day old. His milestone moments of early childhood will be plastered on the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram feeds of his doting parents, and by the time he is a toddler, there will be at least a few smartphone or tablet apps that belong to him on his parents' devices. His life will be an open book in many respects, chronicled for his own parents' posterity but also shared with a world of close friends and not-so-close acquaintances. By the time he starts kindergarten, he will have spent thousands of hours staring at screens. Technology will be a part of life.

There is no way to take away the technology experiences that kids have before they even enter our public K-12 classrooms, and we shouldn't seek to do that. However, it does change the way this generation of K-12 students will approach the pursuit of knowledge, and it is vastly different from previous ones. Perhaps just as important as the facts our students learn is making sure they are confident and correctly obtaining that knowledge. Assessments are one way to check up on this goal.

Assessments of the future will need to ask more questions about the how of knowledge and not just focus on the what. There is no longer one set of books that answer a particular set of questions, and even materials as traditional as U.S. history books are coming under scrutiny for being too one-dimensional.

These issues have come to the fore in Texas where a battle rages regarding the inclusion of alternative versions of American history textbooks in high schools. More than 50 organizations and a coalition of Hispanic-American educators in the state petitioned the Texas State Board of Education to allow alternative history as an elective for high school students. The petitioners were not asking to change the traditional textbooks, but merely to add more perspectives to the learning process for those who elected it. The petition was denied, ostensibly because of cost concerns, but certain board members admitted that they feared leftist ideals entering history textbooks (Wang, 2018).

Politics aside, the debate in Texas brings up some other interesting points about how exactly this generation of K-12 students obtains knowledge. Simply disallowing the alternative histories in classrooms does not cut off student access; it just directs them to unauthorized versions that can be created and posted online, by anyone. This is true for any topic. Students have all the information they will ever need at the tips of their fingers, and they will grow up never knowing what life was like pre-Internet. They don't need to go to the library or to check a few sources before determining the "true" answer—they just need a smartphone. This presents a slippery slope for educators, who have been told to embrace the very technology that often misinforms their students. Not all free information, particularly online, is created equal. More than ever, educators need to show students how to find the answers on their own. This process of finding information should vary from school to school to adjust to the populations using it, but the process should comprise the following features.

An online vetting process. How can students know if what they are reading is reliable? This starts by considering the source through a short list of reliable websites and publications. Government publications, big trusted nonprofits, and some newspapers should make this list. Since some editorial content is now going the way of paid content, otherwise known as native advertising, sites with an interest in making money (including some "news" publications) should be examined with a skeptical eye. As advertising online continues to evolve, so too should the way we examine the content we consume—and students should be a part of that process. Students should know how to spot unbiased, reliable information and separate that from misleading content. That skill starts with vetting the source and looking for clues in the content that point to reliability, instead of simply taking what is presented at face value.

Instruction in the basics. Though actual books on shelves are rapidly disappearing, the information housed in our school, university, and public libraries is still an important cornerstone of learning, particularly when students are searching for information. Our students should know the difference between a Wikipedia page online and a peer-reviewed article on the same topic. They should understand reference books and where to find the information contained within them—whether that is a physical library shelf or a specific website.

Investigating multiple sources. The instant gratification of the Internet has provided a shortcut for today's students when it comes to research and obtaining knowledge. Answers are quite literally at the tips of their fingers and easy to insert in any assignment. Students should question what they read, however, even if the sources seem reliable. A benefit of the Internet is that there is more than one side to every story, which means that today's students should be handing in well-rounded work that contains more than one piece of information. Even the "facts" surrounding our Founding Fathers and other pieces of American history are scrutinized more closely, in part because of the vast reach of the Internet. Students should be encouraged to seek out more than one avenue when it comes to the learning process, and they should use that information to formulate a well-rounded response to any assignment.

An understanding of Internet-related ethics. Today's students do not need to write answers on the insides of their hands or pay another student to write their research papers to cheat academically. In many cases, all they need is a cell phone, a search engine, and sometimes a credit card. With so much information available at the touch of a button, student understanding of what is cheating when it comes to finding answers can be murky.

Recently, one of the most lauded public schools in New York, Stuyvesant High, was caught in a massive cheating scandal. The cheating was discovered when school authorities confiscated the cell phone of a 16-year-old during an exam. Scouring the phone, officials realized they'd stumbled on a huge cheating network. The students had been passing photographs of the text pages to each other. Sixty-nine students were nabbed in the subsequent investigation; all would have to retake the exams.

The Stuyvesant High scandal caught the attention of the nation because of the school's stature; however, it was by no means an outlier. Similar activity in a Houston school during an English exam let to disciplinary action for 60 students. And cheating on an SAT at a Long Island school led to national changes in the how authorities administered the test.

A recent graduate of Stuyvesant, Madeline S. Rivera, felt that social networking had created an upsurge in cheating and said, "I can assure you it is pretty much the same at every other high school" (Baker, 2012, para. 16). A Common Sense Media survey (2009) discovered that at least 35 percent of students had cheated on assignments via cell phone—though many of those respondents were unaware that what they had done was ethically questionable. Some ways that students cheat to find their answers include texting answers to other students, storing notes on their cell phones, rewriting information found online that requires no further research, using virtual assistant programs to find answers, and flat-out paying online companies to write papers or complete assignments for them. In a lot of cases, it may not even occur to the students that they are doing anything unethical. To them, they are just finding the answers to the questions as efficiently as possible. This reliance on the quickest, most accessible information is dangerous to the academic futures of K-12 students, and educators should fight against it through policy and discussion. Students may have to unlearn the information-gathering tactics that have been built in from birth.

How do we assess this information-gathering process? It is one thing for teachers to align their lesson plans with these methods; it is another to be able to tell which students have mastered them. We require a separate assessment that focuses solely on the process of information seeking—whether it is in included in assessments that are already written or given as a test at certain benchmarks in the K-12 career. The optimal time would be midway through the elementary career (third grade) and then again in sixth grade, ninth grade, and 12th grade. These tests should be graded individually by each teacher.

Instead of an actual “test,” these skills might be assessed in the way of a class project. Research papers and other long-term projects are certainly not new to a teacher’s agenda, but the “assessment” side of this information gathering would have specific requirements for the intended outcomes listed above. Guiding the way our students obtain knowledge will impact every other fact or piece of knowledge, and these skills need to be a required piece of K-12 learning–and then tested.

More Critical Thinking Options

Applied knowledge is crucial to the learning process; thus, standardized tests need to do better when measuring it. Every child needs to be able to articulate what he or she knows, not just repeat it. While it may not be as efficient to grade answers that go beyond filling in a bubble, students need to answer questions that require them to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios. Instead of merely finding the answer, students need to explain their answers.

What exactly is critical thinking and how does it play into our K-12 classrooms? Do educators understand the concept? According to Paul (2004), most educators do not understand what critical thinking entails and are therefore unable to teach it to their students. In *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*, he writes: "Critical thinking is the art of thinking about thinking with a view to improving it" (Elder & Paul, 2012).

Elder & Paul speak specifically to the lack of critical thinking in college classrooms and how faculty there are often unable to teach it adequately (2012), but as we all know, the students who show up in college classrooms are products of our K-12 environments. Young adulthood is too late to teach the basic tenets of critical thinking. For one thing, students have by then already figured out all their academic shortcuts. Many have figured out how to rig the academic system in their favor. By college age, students have mastered the K-12 structure that earned them a high school diploma and are eager to apply those habits in higher education.

However, critical thinking skills need to be taught and properly assessed long before that first college course and well before college graduates are in the workforce (Elder & Paul, 2012).

Critical thinking improves writing and communication skills. By ensuring that more critical thinking and explanation standards are written into assessments, teachers are guaranteeing that students can explain what they know both in the classroom and in real life.

To change our K-12 classrooms into critical thinking hubs, we must address the limitations of the traditional teacher-student model. Historically, classroom learning has been a one-way conversation in which students were talked “at” and not “with.” Students were expected to sit politely, behave, and do the work asked of them. A student who questioned the presented material might be viewed as disruptive or even mean-spirited. While there are certainly students who act out in class simply to get attention or avoid their schoolwork, this traditional setup has caused students to be less active participants in their education. It has taken learning empowerment away from students who are conditioned to simply believe what they are told, complete the work, and keep their heads down.

Classrooms today are much more interactive than they were even a decade ago (LaBree, 2016). Nevertheless, the “teacher knows best” mentality lingers and gets in the way of students taking an active role in what they are learning and how they are learning it. When you factor in high-stakes testing and its implications for the careers of teachers, funneling vast amounts of information in that one-way conversation style often seems like the only viable approach for teachers. For many teachers, there is a lacuna between the way they want to teach and the way they are forced to teach. This is primarily due to unreasonable accountability standards that include student performance on standardized tests.

We should strive to reach a point where teachers are no longer afraid to stop and take questions on a certain topic or to entertain a counter view on a topic from a student for the sake of classroom discussion because they are worried about losing time on test-related material. Students who not only master the material but can evaluate it for themselves should be able to pass any assessment with flying colors. We just need to decide as an educational community that critical thinking components are vital to the learning process and that taking the time to include them in our testing process does more good for our students than simply filling in a multiple-choice bubble. Teaching our students that it is okay to question and doubt and take the time to agree with the answers will go a long way toward creating future generations of critical thinkers.

Solutions

Assessment is a practice, which if done correctly, can yield valuable information about student ability, progress, and performance. Too often, educators view assessment as something that can be performed at any time and still provide stable results. This is far from the truth. Assessments must be performed under optimal conditions to yield reliable data. If an above-average student came to school looking visibly tired, stomach grumbling, and visibly agitated and was given a standardized exam, how do you think that student would perform? What if the same student took the exam when she or he was visibly chipper, energetic, and at peace? More often than not, Black boys in impoverished neighborhoods reflect the first of these scenarios. Assessing them under optimal conditions might not always be possible. Because of this, educators may have to be flexible and creative in their test administration.

Instruction and assessment are two sides of the same coin. For students to fare well on assessments, they have to be taught the skills that they will be tested on. Black boys and girls, more than any other group, are likely to be instructed by low-quality teachers in underperforming schools, in impoverished neighborhoods. Whether or not they receive quality instruction on the skills that they will be tested on is not up to them. Consequently, the ability to perform well on assessments is not up to them either. We must provide them with the supports and resources that they need to be successful. If we don't, how can we in good conscience attempt to hold them accountable for their performance? How do we provide all students, including Black boys, with assessments that work, while also thinking about the future?

Providing Critical Thinking Skills

Given the above, what should critical thinking options look like in assessments? The Common Core Standards adopted by more than 40 states already emphasize more of a hands-on approach to classroom learning, and those values are reflected in the accompanying tests (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.). A good example of a critical thinking exercise for a third-grader would be to not simply rehash the plot of a story but to draft an email that one character would likely to write to another. In this example, the student is taking the knowledge presented and then extending it to include his thoughts on the story. In the reading portion of assessments, activities such as this should be asked of the test takers. Comprehension is still important, of course, but alongside the basics of what is read should be proof that the student truly understood the material and can not only regurgitate it but can interpret it beyond what is on the page.

In areas like math, critical thinking is also important. Numbers on a page tend to feel somewhat removed from the human experience. Critical thinking exercises should breathe new life into those numbers and find a way to incorporate them in daily life. A student should be able not only to show his or her work but to explain why a certain solution was reached and what math concept it demonstrates. There also needs to be more cohesion between different areas of math to show that the subject is not as cut and dry as it seems and that all the concepts are interrelated. Our math assessments need to reflect more of the process of reaching math goals and place less emphasis on the final answer.

The critical thinking element needs to spill over into all subjects, not just language arts and math. Traditionally, the assessment process has been heavy on answers and light on the processes to get there. That is starting to change. More teachers and administrators are recognizing that a fuller grasp of critical thinking processes is necessary to improve K-12 classrooms and the next generation of adults.

Higher Levels of Digital Access

All facets of education are being impacted by the rapid evolution of technology, and assessments are not immune. Not only should educators be able to tap into digital resources for assessment preparation, but students should be able to take assessments using the technology that makes them most comfortable. In other words, we need to ditch the Scantron forms and No. 2 pencils and give our kids access to the right technology to make them comfortable with the tests they are taking and to streamline the process for scorers. There is value in the handwritten word, but this generation of K-12 students will not be handing in business reports or notes scribbled with pencil on college-ruled paper. Our kids should be learning to type early on and using the wide array of technology at their fingertips for the learning process. Assessments should reflect that shift.

To those outside the educational community, the idea that students should be able to take tests using computers and other pieces of technology that make them comfortable is a no-brainer. Within the educational community, there is always some fretting when it comes to anything related to technology. For decades, classroom assessments have been done in quiet classrooms with individual test packets and students filling in bubbles on scan sheets with sharpened pencils. In recent years, there have been added sections for free thought that exists outside of multiple-choice responses, but the tests are virtually the same as they were when many of us took our standardized tests as K-12 students. Changing the format of how these tests are delivered is a scary proposition for many lawmakers and administrators, and the change comes with a hefty price tag. When you add in the voices of educators who are leery of any technology takeovers in classrooms, it isn't difficult to see why there is so much handwringing when it comes to updating the way assessments are delivered. Nevertheless, it is important to find an economic way to make the technology of assessments possible.

There are several schools of thought when it comes to what kids should be learning in our K-12 schools. Some believe all activities should be focused on getting students ready for the real world and should point to career-readiness programs. Why waste time in the classroom on lofty ideas or flighty benchmarks that have no adaptation to real life? Others believe that there should be at least some inclusion of intellectual pursuits for their own sake. Not everything learned in a K-12 classroom needs a direct relationship with something in the real world that will benefit our students monetarily down the road. Some learning is simply important to developing better humans who pass along that cultural knowledge to the next generations.

It is our job to ensure students have adequate access to and mastery of the technology that will be part of their everyday lives as adults. Wherever possible, technology should be incorporated into our lesson plans and used in our classrooms because it will make a difference in how well-versed this generation of students will be across disciplines.

Integrating higher levels of technology in assessments, whether the state-mandated versions or in-classroom ones, will have two positive results. The first is that they will reinforce students' use of technology by asking them to use it to take the tests. The second is that assessments will make more sense in the grand scheme of classroom learning, which is already much more interactive than the traditional test-taking process that is still used in standardized assessments. Students who take tests on computers or tablets will be more comfortable with the material at hand and feel like they are participating in more of an integrated process. To remain a world leader when it comes to the fast pace of technology, educators need to insist that technology be part of not only the teaching process but also of assessment process.

Better Assessments Based on Cultural and Learning Differences

Not all students are natural test takers. Any educator who has spent even a small amount of time in classrooms knows this. In much the way that different students have different learning styles, students have varying ability when it comes to taking tests. Most times, teachers can account for this in their classrooms based on the students they serve. Even if the teachers do not adjust the tests or assignments from one year to the next, their general demographic remains the same based on location. Inner-city math teachers, for example, could include word problems that relate to the students entering their classrooms and stay away from obscure references that make the material seem even more disconnected from the real life of the students. A science teacher in an elite prep school could do the same, using references that strike a chord with the students who walk through the door and thus grounding the material.

Statewide assessments don't have that level of customization. They are created for one set of students and are then applied to the rest. A student who feels isolated from the material will not be as successful in answering the questions. Those who speak English as a second language, for example, may not perform as well on assessment tests as their peers. Standardized assessments make many assumptions about those who are taking them, to the detriment of the students. For assessments to be effective, the background of the student answering the questions should always be considered. What sorts of cultural differences should be considered when assessments are created?

Socioeconomic status. Students from homes where one or both parents have a college education tend to have more advanced linguistic capabilities, and accomplishing school tasks comes more easily than for students from economically disadvantaged homes. This is not to say that test questions should be easier or in any way "dumbed down" based on the income of a family in question, but assessments should be carefully written with these factors in mind. If all students had the chance to take tests that played to their socio-economic strengths and avoided pitfalls that make that student feel isolated from the material, we would see a drastic change in test scores. Considering the socioeconomic status of students is a very important part of the assessment process that needs to be addressed for all students to succeed.

Language. The language spoken at home should play into the type of assessment students receive. Students who speak English as a second language, even fluently, should have the option to take their assessments in whatever language makes them the most comfortable.

There should never be a debate about whether a student knows “enough” of the English language to perform well on an assessment. If there is even a question, the student should be given the test in his or her native language or at least asked for the preference. If we are truly trying to gauge what these students know, we should not force them to battle the language barrier to present that knowledge. Students should be allowed to request tests in whatever language makes them the most comfortable—no questions asked, and no hoops to jump through.

Learning style. This one is a little more complicated to implement and possibly a pipe dream at this point in the assessment reform process. A perfect assessment system would allow students to answer questions in a way that complemented their personalities and learning styles. Teachers could help determine this through their observations of the students. The trick would be to ensure that all the material was equally difficult and that the students were placed with the right test based on their true learning style. A student who did well in traditional test taking, for example, may perform worse in a testing environment that was tailored to visual or hands-on learners. This type of assessing would need some trial and error to get right but could end up yielding big results in student test success. It’s something that would need a lot more research and testing before implementation, but I believe it would be worth the effort to reach a point of truly fair and accurate assessments.

One of the strongest arguments against standardized assessments is that they are just that—standardized. To give a full picture of what students are learning, assessments need to be customized to fit students’ life circumstances and personalities. It is contradictory to say that American public schools embrace students from all backgrounds, at all learning levels, and with every personality type, but then to test one model student that is not an accurate representation of any of them. This doesn't further our educational pursuits, and it certainly does not further the academic success of the students who take the tests. Blanket assessments are not an accurate representation of a teacher's strengths. By trying to accommodate the masses, assessments have left behind the individuals, and the result is a system of testing that does nothing to help anyone in the process and contributes little to what we know about actual student progress.

As they exist today, standardized assessments are ineffective and misleading. By adjusting tests to meet the individual needs of the students taking them, the assessments would at least stand a chance of affecting the lives of the students who take them. It may be impossible to tailor each test to the needs of the student who will take it, but as technology improves, the tools will exist to make this at least partially a reality. Consider a future in which teachers can type in information about a student and then receive a customized test based on that information. We have the technology through our smartphones that tells us right down to the grocery store aisle what is for sale—surely there is a developer out there who can create the same type of targeting for test making. We should be able to create tests that will most benefit our students and give educators the most accurate picture of what is being learned. At this point, that type of test reform is necessary to understand what is being taught and learned in our K-12 classrooms.

Concluding Thoughts

It's time to tear apart the traditional way our K-12 students are tested and look for a more targeted approach that implements technology, focuses on information gathering, and accounts for the differences among the students who take the assessments. It will take a lot of work, and the initial cost outlay may be substantial, but the result will be effective assessments that tell us something about the progress of individual students.

If we want to make our public schools places that deliver the brightest minds of their generations, then we owe it to these students to make testing fair and beneficial. It should not simply be a process involving measuring sticks and statistics; assessments should give us a wider, more detailed perspective on what our students have learned so far, how they've learned it, and what their learning outlook is for the future. Although this chapter has talked mostly about how reimagining K-12 assessment can help all students, I hope you can see how the strategies and techniques discussed here have the potential to help Black boys the most. Like older African Americans say, "when White America gets the sniffles, Black folk get the flu." I hope you understand the analogy.

Chapter 9: Lack of Early Childhood Intervention (Obstacle 8)

Early and frequent intervention is needed for all students, but it is especially important for Black boys. Learning begins at birth, which is why early education programs are so important for Black boys and other disadvantaged children. These programs provide an integral foundation for young minds and prepare children for success at school and in life. Black boys who don't receive high-quality early education are more likely to drop out of school and more likely to be arrested for a violent crime. Intervening early and often is a cost-effective way to promote the positive development of Black boys and strike at the causes of the school-to-prison pipeline.

As with the other strategies we have discussed, the strategy of intervention requires a multilevel and multilayer focus. Intervention strategies must be developed with sound theoretical backing and implemented with adequate resources. Qualified teachers and special educators must be available to manage the implementation and monitor progress. Moreover, this entire process presupposes the availability and application of tools to identify and measure developmental delays and special needs in the first place.

The goal of this chapter is to address the key elements of intervention: diagnostic strategies and intervention. We will show how schools identify Black boys and other children needing support at an early age and describe the methods often employed to provide support. We will then outline the circumstances under which intervention can be successful, as well as how early intervention can be used to end the crisis among Black boys.

Definitions and Key Parameters of Early Intervention

Generally speaking, early intervention offers children “good quality, early experiences” (Underwood, 2012), usually with an emphasis on the educational side of human development (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). The World Health Organization (WHO) places intervention in a global context and provides a three-point description of the objectives of early intervention. Early intervention is first seen as a means of preventing disability. The prevention of additional impairments is the second aim, while the third is to minimize the impact of any disability that has already occurred. Note that all these purposes are preventative (Underwood, 2012).

Successful implementation of early intervention depends on two elements: awareness and access. These two elements are deeply intertwined. Awareness depends on communication among early intervention units, educational professionals, health-care providers, and parents. Awareness entails a knowledge of the nature, goals, and mechanism of early intervention as well as knowledge of who is a qualified recipient and how the process can be initiated. The access element of early intervention ensures that available resources and those who administer them are capable of meeting the needs of qualifying Black boys and their families.

Because intervention works best when it occurs as soon as a learning problem is noted, parents and family members need to receive information about developmental phases and the services available through early intervention programs as soon as possible. While family physicians and pediatricians are the first responders for issues of this sort, other education professionals, including those who oversee or participate in preschool programs and daycares, should know of and be able to refer parents to early intervention services.

Access also deals with having a wide enough range of resources. Early intervention is deeply multidisciplinary, typically making use of the services of child and youth workers, social workers, speech and language specialists, and pediatric psychologists. These specialists typically focus their attention on needs related to speech and language, occupational therapy, and physical therapy.

Differences Between Early Intervention and School-Based Supports

Although the title of this chapter indicates a focus on early intervention programs, it is appropriate to describe the differences between early intervention and school-based support before proceeding further. We should describe the similarities and differences between these programs.

Although there are differences between early intervention and school-age supports for children with disabilities or special education needs, there are also obvious similarities. Supports provided by early intervention programming have less of an explicitly academic focus. Granted, there is the long-term goal of promoting academic success, but these goals are pursued indirectly, with the awareness that prevention is a workable strategy and that a student needs the best possible developmental balance.

Within the parameters of early intervention, a healthy student exhibits an appropriate level in areas of development. He or she can enjoy a healthy, active, and productive existence inside and outside of the learning environment. The multidisciplinary approach for early intervention is holistic. Most school-based services operate on the understanding that there must be a quantifiable delay for a child to receive support. There are also limits as to how supports can be used. School-based programs are less proactive and preventative, tending to approach special education resources and opportunities with an “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mindset.

In addition to using professionals to provide early intervention services, most early intervention programs offer support across a broad range of developmental domains. In their approach to disabilities, which are defined as dysfunctional interactions between an individual and his environment, early intervention again goes further than most school-based programs. Early intervention programs tend to work on those disabilities that hinder Black boys in areas both outside and inside the education environment. Impairment of interaction with the environment, which is not limited to school, broadens the scope of interventions that can be offered. While there may be occasional support in schools, the principal service provider of school-age supports is the teacher and, ideally, the regular education teacher. This is not always the case with early intervention.

Early Intervention Procedures and Parameters

The procedures for managing early intervention programs are complex. Of the many administrative issues that impact early intervention procedures, funding is crucial, as are the logistics of service delivery. In the United States, federal funding and legislation supports mandatory early -education programs in every state. A formal system of early intervention is explicitly mandated in legislation and has led to a substantial increase in the number of services available to children with disabilities. These services are, however, not meted out fairly. Moreover, as is evident in the following story, these services can be difficult to access.

In a *New York Times* story, Lena and Robert Serpico describe their experiences with their son whom they had taken in (along with his brother) as a foster child (Carey, 2014). Early on, it was clear that the boy had difficulties. He was restless and had problems focusing. Like so many other restless kids in elementary school, he was put on Ritalin, which seemed to help for a time. He started doing better in school, picked up the guitar, and became involved in sports. However, things changed when he turned 14 (perhaps not coincidentally, about the time he started dating). He attempted suicide and threatened to try again.

The Serpicos took their son to various psychiatrists, and he was diagnosed with everything from depression to bipolar disorder. They tried various therapies and drugs, but nothing worked. He began to slack off at school, and the Serpicos put him into a recommended day therapy clinic. He was kicked out for bringing a weapon to a session. They tried another clinic, and he was again kicked out, this time for refusing to participate, saying "It's useless all this stuff. It's a waste of my time."

Finally, it seemed that their only option was to put their son in long-term residential care. However, these services cost from $10,000 to $60,000 per month, far more than they could afford (Carey, 2014). The Serpicos tried to get insurance to pay for the care but were refused again and again. Mrs. Serpico said,

> I called the insurance company nonstop for two straight days, begging and pleading for help. I finally got through to a decision maker and said that if my son is released home and dies, it will be on your conscience. (Carey, 2014, p. 242)

The Serpicos' son was finally admitted to a residential care home, but on a week-by-week basis. Two months later, he was back at home, unchanged. Finally, after hiring a lawyer, they managed to get their troubled child into a government-sponsored therapeutic home in Montana for a year (Carey, 2014). Though the Serpicos' difficulties may seem extreme, their experience is not that unusual. Lower-income families often lack the emotional as well as financial resources to deal with children who do not fit into the system and for whom only drastic intervention seems to work.

In the United States, when a student is identified as needing intervention, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) typically used in grades K-12 or an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) typically used in PreK is developed for the student. A standard IEP is an education plan developed specifically for each K-12 student with a disability. A well-thought-out IEP represents some of the best personalized planning in education. The IEP lays out a year’s worth of instruction and identifies appropriate goals and the educational milestones that will form the path to meeting them for special education students. IEPs are often intricate documents that are 20 to 30 pages long; developing IEPs can be an arduous process. An IFSP outlines a plan for young children (PreK) who need early intervention services. It is customized for each child as well as the family. For instance, when children are receiving early intervention services, the family may also need training to support their child’s needs. Since an IFSP is customized for the individual, every IFSP will be different (Underwood, 2012).

Goals in IEPs and IFSPs are designed to target educational objectives. Goals tend to vary, however, because different states have different guidelines and curricula outlining expectations for students (Underwood, 2012). One of the major factors to be aware of in the current early intervention and school-based support systems is that expectations play a huge role in outlining goals. Because goals vary from state to state and there are sometimes different interpretations of relevant goals and standards, consistency in service delivery is a problem. The underlying goal of early intervention and school-based supports is to help children or older students overcome academic challenges related to developmental delays or disabilities.

Based on individualized goals—developed in line with the broader standards—Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) parameters are developed. SDIs are strategies designed to support the educational needs of a student who qualifies for early intervention or school-based services (Underwood, 2012). For instance, a Black boy in the third grade who struggles with staying on task and who cannot concentrate due to a condition such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), would perhaps have an IEP with an SDI detailing the need for tasks to be broken down into smaller chunks. Another related SDI might be the delivery of specific prompts directly to the student by the teacher, to encourage the student to remain focused.

Another SDI might be the provision of extra time and the option to take breaks at regular intervals to support concentration. Inevitably, the process for early intervention is very similar to this but concentrated in the home environment because this is the natural learning environment for most children up to the age of six. Continual data collection, tracking, and analysis occur while a child receives early intervention or school-based services. At the same time, goals, objectives, and SDIs are updated. The formal IEP or IFSP is updated and establishes the parameters for service by the treatment team. The treatment team is everyone involved in support of a child's or student's academic needs— including the parents (Underwood, 2012).

Ideally, when Black boys with disabilities prepare to enter school, there should be a smooth transition from the early-childhood environment to the school setting and, if necessary, swift implementation of the goals, objectives, and SDIs according to the child's needs. Undoubtedly, this is one point in which there are deficits in effectiveness and efficiency. The transition phase of early intervention or intermediate units (between early intervention and school, in some states) is often bottlenecked. Families in districts and states must all go through the transition process at roughly the same time of year. Meetings with parents or guardians are required, which adds to the logistical issues of organizing diagnostic, data-collection, and service-delivery efforts.

Challenges for Early Intervention Services

For early intervention opportunities to be effective, some of the existing procedures and parameters need to be reviewed and revised. The suggestion here is that early intervention is the appropriate strategy for promoting academic success for most students, and especially Black boys. It offers a relatively cost-effective and efficient approach for promoting quality education as well as offering necessary supports for academic success. That said, there is still a need to ensure maximum efficiency.

Given the contention that early intervention is so crucial to the enhancement of the American education system, we need to place more resources into early childhood education. The elements are in place for early intervention to be a success, but the related logistical issues, including the transition to school, are difficult. According to Reynolds (2000) and others, the educational environment needs specific mechanisms or processes to be in place in order to facilitate teaching and learning. At the same time, mechanisms can be related to human development. Examples of such development-focused interventions include maternal responsiveness, parental monitoring, cognitive development, and school and community support (Reynolds, 2000).

Reynolds (2000) tracked the success of early intervention and identified important program elements. The following measurements correlated with academic success: preschool participation (in years), duration of program participation (in years), and extended program participation for four to six years. Students were found to be more successful when they had high participation in all three areas. Parent participation in preschool was also found to be an important factor, as was school quality (Reynolds, 2000).

In other words, early intervention programs should emphasize these elements—opportunities for students to participate in preschool environments before enrollment in school, opportunities for parent engagement, and opportunities for preschoolers to participate in the program. At the same time, early intervention programs are governed by financial and logistical considerations. No matter how much they might wish it, school districts and states can spend only so much on early intervention support services. Budgetary considerations must have some weight, not necessarily in determining rigid service parameters, but certainly in creating service guidelines.

Importance of Frequent Early Intervention Programs

The importance of early intervention has to do with the relationship between academic success and the ability to function—behaviorally, emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually—in one's environment.

It is well documented that Black boys, more than any other student group, experience disruption to their learning as a result of behavioral issues and lack of skill in key learning domains. In other words, they often struggle academically because they don't function well in their environment. This is especially true for Black boys entering school for the first time. In the areas of language, early literacy, mathematics, socialization, and self-care, Black boys may experience delays that cause them to lag behind in their studies.

For Black boys with diagnosed disabilities, including the now astonishing number of Black boys with behavioral disorders, the supports of early intervention help to prevent additional developmental difficulties and make existing development conditions better (Underwood, 2012). Beyond this, there are also the positive and direct aims of early intervention, which include the promotion of early learning opportunities and the enhancement of basic knowledge and skills for students. Early intervention strategies, according to available research efforts, support these positive aims.

A significant amount of research confirms the success of all types of early intervention programs. As a result of their successes, early intervention programs of various types are widely accepted as having both a preventative and a positive impact on child development, with particular emphasis on the management of special needs and promotion of school-readiness for Black boys (Guralnick, 2000).

Other specific benefits of early intervention programs include fewer referrals to special education services in schools. At least one major study suggests that there are gains in developmental outcomes for all children in inclusive early childhood settings (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). The success of early intervention is not unqualified, though. As we have suggested, obvious challenges exist for the implementation and effectiveness of these programs. There are two keys to intervention strategies. First, the strategies and support programs depend on identifying Black boys who need extra help early. Second, they depend on providing some ways for Black boys to receive support. There is growing evidence that such programs can prevent problems from occurring in later grades.

The importance of identifying problems early is logical. The earlier a problem is identified—especially those related to development and its relationship to learning—the faster a resolution can be established, and any academic issues related to the delay can be addressed or even prevented. Because most developmental issues have an impact on learning, another reason for the importance of early intervention is simply that it can lessen certain problems, limiting academic delays caused by the developmental issue. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why early intervention from birth to five years is so crucial.

Most children do not enter a formal school setting until about the age of five or six. This depends on a variety of factors, but primarily on calendar age and maturity. A child who receives intervention to address delays before he or she enters formal schooling is far more likely to succeed academically than a child who does not receive such interventions. However, interventions later in a child's school career, when he or she is already struggling, have a limited impact.

Principal objectives for service delivery in a school setting would be twofold. The child would need to have assistance to address their diagnosed delay. They would also require assistance to maintain an appropriate standard of academic performance, and to keep up with peers, In addition, they would need help to make up any knowledge that had been lost in the time between which the developmental issue became apparent and the point at which it was actually addressed with appropriate interventions. Because of the natural logistics of the system, there is often at least a 60-day window before adequate data can be collected about the needs of a student. Adequate data is needed for school teams to create IEPs, and data collection is the general purpose of the 504 plan that serves as a monitor for a child's academic progress and general developmental progress. A 504 plan lists the accommodations or services for students with disabilities who qualify under the U.S. Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Early intervention should be considered together with the system's objectives. For children from birth to pre-K, IFSPs or IEPs target the development of positive socio-emotional skills, the ability to apply appropriate behaviors to meet needs, and the development of skills related to knowledge and skills acquisition. For these children, the pertinent knowledge and skill areas are generally concentrated in the areas of early language development and communication. Language and communication skills serve as a foundation for more advanced developmental learning. Other skills targeted for children in this age range include problem-solving skills, basic number concepts, and basic reasoning skills.

In child-centered terms, the goal of early intervention is to ensure that children entering school have the necessary skills to succeed academically; that is, they are able to meet the demands of the classroom learning experience as well as the specific demands related to knowledge and skills acquisition. Students are often retained because they have failed to master some level of knowledge or certain skills, especially about basic literacy. If early intervention helps to reduce the number of Black boys who are retained, its use is justified. Early intervention is a crucial tool for the development of literacy skills and communication skills. It is also crucial for the development of appropriate socio-emotional and behavioral skills, all of which have an important, if indirect, impact upon educational experience.

Early intervention also removes ideas of student accountability, at least insofar as it is applied to students before they enter school when learning is very much a natural process, undertaken in the natural environment—including, most notably, in the home. From the perspective of early intervention, the fact that Black boys do not develop certain skills or acquire certain knowledge is not necessarily the fault of the child or their environment. It may be that fundamental developmental processes and various foundational skills must be developed before a higher level of learning is possible.

Teacher Education in Areas of Developmental Delay and Inclusion

The strength of strategies and special education support resources can only do so much to promote the academic success of Black boys who have a developmental delay or disability. Regular classroom teachers remain vital touchstones for early intervention, not only as key figures in the diagnostic process but also as supporters of early intervention models and implementers of certain early intervention strategies.

Teachers must receive training to spot students who could benefit from special education supports. Likewise, all teachers involved in the teaching of preschoolers who are within the age range for early intervention need to have specific training and knowledge to be able to spot potential developmental or learning issues. All teachers and general educators, and not just those working in early childhood, should receive specific training in teaching special education programs. All teachers need to understand how to provide support holistically.

One of the biggest challenges for effective early intervention is the development of a system that provides consistent supports across all settings. School success depends on the ability of children to function on many levels and their ability to adapt to change and manage stress. Learning opportunities exist for children everywhere, especially young children. Early intervention should be able to take advantage of this and teach the natural caregivers and supporters how to use these opportunities. Many programs can inspire parents to help their children learn. For instance, many public libraries offer reading programs over the summer, partly to help parents minimize loss of skills over the summer months. Such programs are not always as well supported as they might be. Teachers and special education professionals are well placed to offer parents information about these sorts of programs.

Teachers could be encouraged not only to share information about how the child can be supported in their learning outside the classroom but also to receive feedback and insights about the child's needs and their experiences at school, as those experiences relate to and affect the home environment. Parent-teacher communication, where early intervention and school-based supports are needed to facilitate a child's learning, is critical. Early intervention and special education systems should help teachers understand family concerns and the needs of exceptional students. This assistance will help teachers meet those needs and communicate with parents about their students' knowledge and skills.

Early Intervention and School Partnerships and Parameters

Another condition for early intervention to serve Black boys better is an appropriate relationship between early intervention organizations and schools. The transition procedure from early intervention to school should be streamlined. There is also a need for far greater consistency between early intervention programs and school-age programs as well as between programs in different regions, including across school districts and states.

Early intervention and school-based service providers must work together to support children because of the unavoidable but often unaddressed reality that children do not arrive in school with empty minds. The educator's task is not to fill the mind (it is already full), but to enlarge its capacity—the capacity for knowledge and critical thinking, for analysis, and for understanding. For this to be achieved and for children to truly be the subject of their educational journey, a working partnership must be developed between early intervention service providers and programs that take on the challenge of supporting children beyond the early developmental phases.

However, a partnership between early intervention and schools cannot occur without an appropriate knowledge foundation. It is crucial that educators at all levels understand how early experiences and early childhood development are crucial to later learning. The broader point is that there needs to be a relationship between the curriculum and the realities that children construct for themselves. This depends on clear collaboration between school and early intervention, beginning with the establishment and maintenance of clear standards for supports.

Early intervention programs and school-based programs must continue to address the specific needs of each child. Standards may dictate the type of supports to be used and what kind of services are to be offered. They may also, for the sake of managing resources, dictate what levels of supports are to be offered to students based on need assessments. The types and levels of support may be customized within parameters defined at a higher administrative level. A Black boy might, for instance, receive more behavioral supports in school or their early childhood environment than would be warranted based on assessment results and diagnostic findings. The reason for this could be that the child was demonstrating a behavior of particular concern and that needed additional support.

Although it is hardly possible to do away with budgetary considerations in the planning of early intervention and school-based supports, the general rule should be established that early intervention services and supports in early school years are likely to produce a much higher return on investment than those applied later in a child’s school career. All educators, but especially special education teachers, must consider the long-term consequences of withholding services and supports that students require to succeed in school and curtail disruptive or self-destructive behavior.

Even with the removal of graded systems and an end to the problems of retention and social promotion, school failure will persist because of counterproductive pressures and inadequate support. Children arrive with expectations, standards of thinking, and processes of learning that, if ignored in the school setting, will cause academic failure and, perhaps, the decision to drop out of school. Black boys who cannot find the intersection between the curriculum and the structures in their heads—and this includes Black boys with special needs—are likely to become part of that estimated 10 percent of the school population that either drops out of school altogether or fails to graduate from high school (Kingsley & Mailoux, 2013).

Just as regular school programs should seek to engage students regarding their interests and passions, early intervention programs and school-based support systems should also collaborate in identifying ways to engage students with special needs based on their interests and passions. As has often been pointed out, the most effective teachers are those who develop learning environments and relationships that promote the cultivation of individual passions.

MATCH is an early intervention program based in Boston that seeks to give students the tools they need to get into college (ABC News, 2007). Almost all the students in the program are minorities, most are from families below the poverty line, and the majority have deficiencies in reading and math. Principal Jorge Miranda says that the school uses rigid discipline and a hefty set of rules to keep students in line. The school day starts before eight and ends at five. Signs posted around the school regulate everything, including the dress code, unexcused absences, tardiness, and poor posture in class. Principal Miranda notes that "If you’re in the classroom and your head is down on the table or you’re leaning back, you’re clearly not focused on learning . . . even if it’s for a minute, that’s a minute that we’ve lost” (ABC News, 2007, “Tough school propels inner-city kids ,” para. 7).

The program takes in students like Luis Sanchez who arrived at the school after living on the streets for two weeks. Initially, it was extremely difficult for Sanchez who said, “It felt like a burden on me, because I wasn’t used to it. And it just hurt me sometimes; it got me frustrated and angry” (ABC News, 2007, “Tough school propels inner-city kids,” para. 11). Classes are small at MATCH—a key feature of schools that implement early intervention effectively. Another key feature is the one-on-one tutoring for students who request it. The tutors, called the MATCH Corps, receive a small stipend that is partially funded through AmeriCorps. They make a one-year commitment to tutor students at MATCH.

Though adjusting to the school can be difficult, it has worked for students like Sanchez, who appreciate the love behind the strictures. Sanchez says, “They cared. I mean, Mr. Sposato, who was our principal back then . . . took me aside about every day and just told me, you know, ‘You’re here to learn. You’re here to do something with your life’” (ABC News, 2007, Watch Dan Harris’ Report,” para. 16). The program not only turns students’ lives around; it also turns them into stellar scholars. The school had the highest scores in math on the state standardized test, and many students had scores high enough to get free tuition at any state university in Massachusetts. All the graduates of its first four graduating classes were accepted into four-year universities (ABC News, 2007).

Early intervention programs and school-based programs must align to promote the interests of all students and foster this kind of student-centered learning model in special learning programs. In particular, if students and specialist staff have the benefit of working within a relatively stable environment—one that does not involve a child transitioning to a new classroom every academic year—then the opportunities for the development of a child-centered learning model and child-centered support systems are endless.

Schools and early intervention organizations can likely manage the costs of providing special education supports by enhancing the efficiency of those supports delivered in the early years. However, they must work together nationwide toward the achievement of equal opportunity, student-centered learning models. With parameters in place and clear guidelines for child-centered supports, schools and early intervention programs can also work together to go beyond budgetary considerations. They may have the opportunity to end much of the dysfunction surrounding the transition of Black boys from early intervention to school programs.

Finally, if early intervention programs and schools can work collaboratively, then the needs of Black boys and their families may be better served. Indeed, some responsibility to remove negative views of early intervention and special education support must fall on schools and early intervention units. These are the groups responsible for supporting students at either end of the academic spectrum—gifted students and those with learning disabilities. There are ethical considerations regarding the integration of exceptional students in traditional classrooms. The legal requirement to provide a free and appropriate education to all students in the least restricted environment is frequently extended to children with special needs. In turn, this mandate implies that integration or “push-in supports” in a traditional classroom produce higher levels of learning than models that remove students with special needs to separate classrooms where they are taught “life skills.”

While not every student will benefit from an inclusive education, the vast majority will. There is a need for promoting the idea of inclusion, the preferred model for learning. Early intervention programs and schools must work toward this by collaboratively promoting parent education and supporting programs related to the delivery of special education services in inclusive environments. Opportunities for training teachers and establishing regularly integrated supports for students with special needs are much more easily and efficiently implemented in schools that de-emphasize standardized testing, standardized curriculum, and graded learning. An important caveat is that the training and supports would be continued for at least two academic years for each child (assuming he or she entered a multiage classroom at the right age).

Functional Behavioral Analysis

Some diagnostic tools have been developed to assist early intervention. For Black boys demonstrating emotional, social, and behavioral delays and dysfunctions, one of the most important diagnostic tools is the functional behavioral analysis (FBA). Educators are increasingly aware of the connection between the social behaviors of Black boys and early academic skills (Powell, Dunlap, & Fox, 2006).

In particular, research has consistently shown that young Black boys who demonstrate challenging behavior may experience disruption to their learning. Problem behaviors may interfere with their opportunities to learn and effectively interact with peers in classroom situations (Bulotsky-Shearer, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2008). Research also recognizes that certain classroom activities, particularly structured activities, place high demands on children who already struggle with behavioral challenges (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2008). Research also shows that children may engage in challenging behavior as a means of avoiding demands placed upon them (Hojnoski & Wood 2012).

As a tool, though, an FBA is a direct and indirect procedure for collecting data related to problem behaviors. Direct data collection methods include classroom observations, while indirect methods of assessment include interviews with parents and teachers and the use of rating scales to assess behaviors. The subsequent analysis of such data identifies behavioral triggers and their antecedents, the reasons why the behaviors occur, and the functions and consequences of the behavior (Kern, DuPaul, Volpe, Sokol, Lutz, Arbolino, & VanBrakle 2007).

Observation

Other diagnostic tools also make use of observation. Occupational therapists will, for example, generally observe students to identify the daily tasks with which children have difficulty. Some diagnostic tools, such as questionnaires, may also be used for occupational therapy assessment as well as language and behavioral assessment. Parent participation and preschool involvement may be important in the use of such tools since the best observations and data are collected from individual students in a classroom context, subjected to the academic, social, emotional, and general behavioral demands of the classroom environment. Even self-care skills and language skills can be better assessed in a classroom than in the home or community, and early intervention acts on this knowledge.

Weaknesses of Existing Diagnostic Tools

Despite the strengths of existing diagnostic tools, they still have their weaknesses. For instance, many school districts administer FBAs indirectly rather than directly. When FBAs are administered indirectly, they concentrate not on direct observations of children in classrooms but on indirect observations. They also tend to lack multiple elements that, in regular assessment procedures, would include efforts to gather information about instructional variables and early academic skill development (Hojnoski & Wood, 2012).

One criticism of FBAs conducted within early education settings is that the same interview form is used by parents and teachers for students spanning a wide range of ages, with only a few modifications made for different age groups. The actual developmental differences, and therefore the questionnaires themselves, do not allow parents and teachers to accurately describe specific behaviors in sufficient detail to definitively assess their developmental appropriateness (Hojnoski & Wood, 2012).

In their assessment of FBAs, Hojnoski and Wood (2012) note that the two interview forms—the forms used for elementary school and the form used for older children—include two general questions to identify areas where skills are lacking. There is, however, little effort to gather information to identify areas of concern related to the development of specific academic skills relevant to early childhood and elementary education (Hojnoski & Wood, 2012).

For diagnostic procedures to be effective, a variety of tools should be used, and these tools should reflect age-appropriate diagnostics for language and for social and behavioral interactions. Early intervention might benefit from specifically targeting the problems that most commonly cause academic delays and disruptions in the classroom. With this information in hand, it might be useful to focus on identifying or otherwise developing age-appropriate tools to test skills and knowledge, and even to identify those students who are most at risk of deficits in certain areas. The goal of early intervention should be not simply to stop or reverse academic delays, but as much as possible to prevent them.

Regarding early intervention supports and strategies, the number of issues addressed requires the use of a corresponding number of supports and strategies to meet student needs. Several types of professionals, some of them educational specialists, are also employed by early intervention units and by school districts to offer supports. For instance, special educators and itinerant teachers may work alongside speech pathologists and occupational therapists.

For early interventions to be effective, there is considerable need for quality service delivery, and service standards should be put in place. The issue of establishing quality services for early intervention supports and strategies has received much attention. One study by Arbesman, Lieberman, and Berlanstein (2013) considered the work of occupational therapists about early intervention and early childhood services and outlined how occupational therapy can be most effectively applied in early intervention.

Another study (Kingsley & Mailoux, 2013) showed that family-centered and routine-based service delivery was generally effective in early intervention studies, but the best approach consisted of a combination of delivery models. Push-in models and pull-out models can be appropriate for both occupational therapy support and service deliveries. With the push-in model, the general education and special education teacher collaborate to educate special needs students within the general education classroom; all the supports and resources are brought directly to the student. With the pull-out model, the student is typically educated outside the general education classroom; a special educator delivers instruction to students individually or in groups. Although the general education teacher is a valuable resource, they are rarely involved in pull-out services. One of the deciding factors, however, is the integration of particular supports within the natural environment as well as the transfer of specific skills to students, their family members, and other educators and community members. These skills provide the means of facilitating a smooth school transition and long-term success in school.

The U.S. early intervention model needs to have greater consistency in its supports and strategies. In particular, there is a high variation among school districts and regions regarding support strategies and resources made available to students based on need.

The United States needs national guidelines about levels of support and methods of support delivery for students who qualify for early intervention services. There should be some effort to scale need against resources, identifying those students, like Black boys, who have the highest level of need and coordinating resources and supports to ensure that the most resources are targeted to those students who have the most substantial issues. A related need is the necessity to develop measures that ensure the proper resources are brought to bear on individual students with specific developmental issues.

The interventions need to be able to address behavior, language and communication, emotions, physical conditions, social interactions, and self-care supports if the needs of Black boys are to be met. Educators need to look beyond the purely academic. A child with an autism diagnosis, for instance, and thus a social communication disorder, may not be deemed to have social and communication issues that significantly impact his or her learning. However, based on the general arc of the disorder, it is probable that such a child will develop academically or educationally significant issues as he or she matures. This occurs as the demands for communication and socialization increase as the child’s fellow students mature.

A different type of “grading” or “social promotion” policy will emerge if early intervention and school-based supports do not look beyond the immediate situation to address the ultimate outcomes that can, over time, undermine a child’s academic development. Thus, providing social and communication supports in school or early learning environments—in the natural setting where social and communication demands exist—will be an investment in the long-term success of the child, helping to cut back on other problems associated with retention and social promotion.

Solutions

I have been an educator since 2001, and I have always been perturbed by America’s backward response to student dropouts and academic failure. What do I mean by that? When a student experiences academic failure or drops out of school, then suddenly, we want to intervene. At that point, we are willing to spend thousands of dollars per year, per student trying to solve an issue that should have been corrected in the early childhood years. We should be investing in the early years of a child’s education, giving students a strong foundation, which will allow them to be academically successful for years to come. If they need intervention during the early childhood or elementary years, so be it; at least when we spend thousands of dollars, we can be sure that issues will be corrected, placing the child on a path towards a successful K-12 career and productive adulthood. And you know who will benefit most from early intervention? Society will be the greatest benefactor. Students, especially boys of color, who receive early interventions, are more likely to stay out of the school-to-prison cycle, saving the American taxpayers billions of dollars each year. In the pages that follow, we will discuss more specific strategies, solutions, and initiatives that can help Black boys and all children get off to a great start academically.

Communication Regarding Services

The first and most crucial task is to link needy families with services in place. Far too often, cities and counties provide services, but the families who need them most are not aware of them or are not in a position to access them. This is for the most part because those families are not linked into the system: they may not have Internet access, and if they do, they may not be aware of the appropriate websites and email alert systems. Black boys disproportionately belong to families that are impoverished and lack access to technology and communication mediums. So, bridging the communication gap is critical to helping them succeed academically.

There is a tendency for social workers and public education employees to throw up their hands and say, “Well, we put the information out there; it’s not our fault if people don’t access it.” This attitude must change. If necessary, workers should go door to door, ensuring every family with young children gets a list of services available and detailed information on how to access them and any potential costs. The information presented should include a list of the benefits of early intervention, as many socioeconomically deprived parents may not even be aware that their children could benefit from the programs.

Teacher-Parent Communication

Far too often, the first indication parents receive about their children’s academic performance is a string of Ds and Fs on a report card or a notice that their child has been suspended. If this is the case, the educational system has failed. I can tell you from experience that any teacher knows within the first two weeks whether a child has academic or behavioral issues in the classroom. That information should be communicated immediately to the parents, and teachers should insist on face-to-face meetings with the parents—possibly including the child as well. At those meetings, support systems should be offered to the parents and the child. All teachers should have tools that allow them to intervene if a child shows signs of faltering achievement. They should recognize that they are the frontline and that every day counts. This is doubly critical for Black boys, because effective school communication can mean the difference between being on track for college or being in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Providing Books

A key area where Black children are left behind is reading. This is, as we saw, a historical issue. During the pre-Abolition era, African Americans were forcibly kept from reading, and the effects of that injustice are still felt today. Perhaps more than any other issue, reading has a domino effect: children who are read to tend to read to their children in turn. Because African American families were forbidden to read just a few generations ago, their households tend not to incorporate books. As we saw in the chapter on income inequality, there are 13 books per child in middle-class neighborhoods, as opposed to 300 children *per book* in lower-class neighborhoods.

This presents a perfect entry point for early intervention: provision of books and offers to read to children will generally be welcomed by families in any neighborhood. It can also provide an ideal locus of connection for volunteers. Wealthy benefactors are often delighted to provide books rather than cash, which may not be used as intended. The very act of reading to a child can create significant bonds and can inspire the child to greater achievement. I saw this in my neighborhood. Though we were poor, we were a reading family and always had books around. My two sisters and I all finished high school and went on to college. However, the kids who didn't have books in their house tended not to do so well in school.

Regimented Programs

Over and over, we see that programs like Boston's MATCH are highly effective. The defining elements of these programs include rigid discipline and an emphasis on following rules. They are also comprehensive, aiming to keep kids off the streets and screens for as much of the day as possible. The programs are expensive, of course, because they require more staff intervention and greater usage of facilities. However, in the long run, they are demonstrably cheaper than allowing children to fail. Black boys who fail not only drag their neighborhoods down; they are also an anchor on future progress, as their children are more likely to fail academically. Cities should be encouraged to spend their money where it counts: on regimented early intervention programs targeted to those most at risk.

Conclusion

Research has overwhelmingly supported the notion that early intervention—and the earlier, the better—is the key to helping Black boys achieve school-readiness and strategies for success. The early intervention model proposed here not only embraces that principle but seeks to celebrate it as a focus of collaboration between those responsible for the early interventions (preschool-age interventions) and the schools, which take charge as a child transitions to school-age programming.

Promoting collaboration as well as early and frequent interventions is a strategy that seeks to build community support for education and for public education specifically. It seeks to emphasize the need for supports across all settings and the benefits for that comprehensive support model. The strategy seeks to eliminate the need for children to be segregated based on special needs. Rather, the only segregation or streaming that should be practiced should be based on academic abilities and learning preferences. Schools could easily support the streaming of groups with certain abilities without targeting students with special needs. The model proposed here will allow them to do so.

A student-centered focus also allows for a flexible and ethically sound approach to supporting Black boys with exceptional needs, whatever they may be. While it is well established in law, for instance, that there can be no discrimination against students based on a variety of factors, including age, family background, disability, and economic status, the reality is that there is at least indirect discrimination in the education system. School district funding is highly competitive, and certain districts around the country essentially act without regard for the best interests of students or higher principles of equality established by law.

In the current system, the "politics" of public education can be detrimental to the needs of Black boys, and very often is. The problem is largely the result of the emphasis on test-taking and on increased levels of support for schools that test well. Of course, supporting students to produce exceptional results in standardized tests is not the domain of specialized instruction. The domain of that educational model is to support students to ensure that they can obtain an education—free, appropriate, and minimally restricted.

The proposed model of frequent and intensive interventions, especially in the early years, allows for a focus on quality education beyond such false parameters as tests. The emphasis can be upon skills for learning rather than static knowledge, allowing that Black boys may learn best throughout their careers if they are supported in the development of solid reasoning skills, critical thinking skills, and a range of fundamental skills that relate to actual function within a school environment.

Chapter 10: From Crisis to Accomplishment—the Way Forward

In the Introduction and previous nine chapters, we've looked at the educational history of African Americans, and at the current situation in this country, especially as it pertains to Black boys. We've glanced at the future, touching on solutions to many of the problems we've mentioned. This book is intended to be a roadmap as well as a mirror, so in this final chapter, we'll take another look at those solutions, placing them into four categories: family-level, community-level, school-level, and government-level.

Family Level

The family is where it all begins. The importance of a strong, supportive family environment cannot be overemphasized in the education of the Black boy. I have seen this firsthand, both when I attended elementary school and when I taught elementary schoolchildren. If a student was unruly, rude to teachers, unkempt, or slacking off, I often discovered that he came from a family that had been broken in some way. Perhaps he was a child of a single parent who was struggling to survive, or his parents were involved in criminal activity or were drug abusers. Perhaps he was sleeping on the couch in a cockroach-infested apartment or was in the care of his grandparents.

There is little that educators can do to change a difficult family situation; however, it is important to recognize that, in the African American community, the woes very often have a historical basis. After all, African Americans only became full citizens half a century ago, after nearly four centuries of persecution. Those chains are still being sundered; those wounds are still being healed.

What can families do to increase the chances that a Black boy will flourish in school? First, focus on nurture. Remember that the approaches you use with a child are tools you are giving that child. If you slap him and shout at him, those are tools he will use in the playing field. If you speak calmly to him and get him to think about the consequences of his deeds, he will be able to carry those tools into the classroom. Even if you don't have the money to provide your son with the latest cell phone or fancy shoes, you can provide him with something much more important: structure, a safe place, and a harmonious home life. Ensure that your son gets to bed on time each night and is up on time each morning. Ensure that he eats three healthy meals a day. Ensure that there is no violence in the home.

Second, it's important to limit screen time. Far too many families rely on television, and now the Internet and digital games, to keep children occupied. Young children should spend a maximum of an hour a day on screens. That includes time spent on cell phones or gaming. The rest of the time should be filled with outdoor play; creative indoor play, such as drawing, building with blocks, and making up stories; and reading.

This last item is crucial. As we saw in Chapter 2, children whose parents read to them tend to do better than those whose parents do not. Start early. Even though you think the child is too young to understand, those small ears are picking up and storing away every word. Just leafing through the pages of a picture book for a few minutes a day can instill a love of reading that can last a lifetime.

There is a tremendous gap in the number of books poor families have compared with families who have higher incomes. This cannot be explained away by poverty. Make it a habit of going to your local thrift stores or garage sales or public library. In those places, you can often find children's books for under a dollar. Take your child along and have him choose books that intrigue him. Every child should have a shelf of books appropriate to his age level and interests.

Finally, ensure that the role models you emulate and celebrate and talk around the dinner table are ones you want your son to aspire to. Are those role models womanizing athletes who beat their girlfriends? Are they hypocritical, money-grubbing preachers? Or are they astronomers, poets, and Nobel Prize laureates? Think about kind of person you want your son to become, and ensure he is exposed to people of that ilk.

Community Level

When they are functioning optimally, communities can be potent forces in nurturing children. They provide safe, friendly spaces, where a child feels welcomed and loved—where he can play without fear and stretch his wings without hindrance. Far too often, communities where Black boys live are dangerous, uninviting places. A child growing up in a place where gunshots are common and where there is no green space in which to play will close in on himself or join the violence.

Community centers can be a wonderful way to counteract those grim spaces. Centers that provide safe, secure after-school programs can help keep wayward children off the streets. They provide places for kids to play sports or skateboard without fear. They can give them incentives to do their homework. Some programs even provide children with the nourishment they are not receiving at home. Time and again in this book, we saw that strong, regimented programs are helpful for children who have a chaotic home life. Community centers can help provide those programs; they can offer stability and structure and safety. A key function of community centers can be to offer a place where helpful people can come together simply.

Among those helpful people should be mentors. I know from personal experience that merely encountering a strong, successful Black man, like the doctor who came to my elementary school class, can have a life-changing effect on a Black boy. If you are a successful Black man in your community, please consider signing up to be a mentor. Simply typing *mentoring* and the name of your town or community in an Internet search engine should bring up a list of organizations. Your local public school may also be able to connect you with a child. I can assure you that you won't be the only one changed by this experience. Mentoring is rewarding for both the mentor and the mentee.

Finally, if you are a successful businessperson or simply have a little extra and want to help, consider donating to a community center or mentorship program. No amount is too small, and the benefits are profound.

School Level

The school and educators are at the heart of this book and, therefore, the primary focus of the rest of this section. As we noted, there is little an outsider can do to change a family situation; likewise, transforming government policy is an immense, ponderous procedure. However, at the classroom and school governance level, it is possible to enact profound change relatively rapidly.

A straightforward issue to address is teacher-parent communication. Every teacher needs to ensure that this channel is open. It is important to note that, especially in poor communities, not all parents may have email capabilities. If they do, they may not check their emails all that often. Those parents may be best reached by phone or by letter. You may choose to send the same information in multiple ways: by phone message, email message, and a note sent home with the child. Make every effort possible to meet with the parents of each child. If they don't show up at a scheduled meeting, try again. And again. It is easy to become frustrated and then noncommittal, placing the blame on the parents. Remember, however, that the boy whose parents don't have the wherewithal to make it to a meeting is often the child who most needs the attention.

In a similar vein, communication about early intervention services is crucial. Far too often, the child who most needs the early intervention is the one whose parents are not in a position to hear about it. It is imperative that children who are floundering be given the tools they need to survive in the classroom. Early intervention can assist with that, but if the parents don't know about the services, the children won't be able to take advantage of them. This is an area where communication between all parties is necessary, but the teacher plays a key role. The teacher is often the first to spot that a child needs intervention. He or she should be aware of the next steps and should take charge of the communication without delay. Every school should have a solid plan in place, with clear, specific action steps to take should a child be flagged for intervention.

Especially in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, disruptive behavior can be a problem in schools. As we saw in Chapter 6, these problems are increasingly being dealt with by calling in law enforcement or by heavy-handed discipline. For a Black boy, this response all too often leads, eventually, to prison. However, there is an alternative. Schools across the nation are turning to restorative justice with enormous success. Restorative justice places the focus on solutions that benefit all parties involved in the conflict. It steers away from punishment and tries to help the offender to understand how he hurt the victim, encouraging him to make the victim whole again. The result is a much lower rate of repeat offense and a transformed sense of social relations. Restorative justice should become the de facto method of dealing with disruptive behavior in schools across the nation.

Multiage classrooms, as we learned in Chapter 5, can be especially beneficial for the Black boy. The rigid strictures of the prevailing system, which tries to churn out high-performing students like cookies on a conveyer belt, are loosened in multiage classrooms. Students who are struggling in a subject area can get the help they need while remaining in contact with their peers. This means that the shaming and bullying that often go with retention are no longer a factor. Similarly, the problems of leaving a child behind are negated. Transforming school systems to multiage classrooms can take a lot of work, at all levels of the school hierarchy. Furthermore, some parents may protest the new system, feeling it cheapens their child's education. However, if the kinks can be worked out, multiage classrooms—especially for younger children—can work wonders.

Along with multiage classrooms, integrated tracking should be standard in schools across the nation. As the Finnish model demonstrates, integrated tracking benefits all students, keeping them together while allowing those who need an extra boost to receive it.

Another transformation that can take a lot of work but has a dramatic impact is a shift to incorporating Howard Gardner's notion of multiple intelligences. The recognition that individual students have gifts that should be nurtured and a greater focus on the arts and physical education can be tremendously liberating for Black boys. Though it may seem counterintuitive, students at schools that embrace Gardner's principles tend to do better on the standard assessments. This suggests that a holistic education, which fosters a passion for learning, produces better results than spoon-feeding students with information they can use on a standardized test.

As a corollary to the above, our nation's schools need to move to a focus on acquiring critical thinking skills, rather than just learning facts. Our country requires young people who can use their talents to innovate—who can research a topic, digest the information, and use it to create something new or enhance their lives. Emphasizing critical thinking rather than teaching to the test will, of course, require changes at the federal or state level; however, it can also be enacted at the school level.

Finally, teachers should receive the training and support they need to teach young African American boys. Especially in the lower grades, most teachers are White and female. Black male teachers comprise less than one percent of the teaching force (Feistritzer, 2011). This means that most Black boys are being taught by teachers who are not intimately familiar with the issues they are going through. Training in racism awareness should be mandatory in schools across the country.

Teachers should also be provided with mentors for the first two years of their career. Ideally, these mentors should have experience and training in working with African American boys and would be able to pass on advice and provide new teachers with the tools to deal with difficult situations.

Government Level

Finally, we're going to look at the changes that need to be made at the government level. Changes at this level, naturally, have a tremendous impact. They are also extremely difficult to implement, and it can take many years for changes to roll through the system. For good or ill, education in the United States is at the whim of the governing party. A new president can usher in sweeping changes that can influence the educational system for a decade or more, as we saw with George W. Bush and NCLB. For this reason, it is imperative that a solid, nonpartisan educational board composed of a broad spectrum of educational professionals be in place at the highest level. This will ensure that, through any transition, basic standards and protections will remain in place.

Some of the issues we looked at in the last section, including multiage classrooms, broadening the definition of intelligence, and promoting the use of restorative justice, should be promoted at the highest levels. Government websites are an ideal venue to present information on these issues. Government-backed transition plans to help schools move toward multiage classrooms and implement restorative justice programs could serve as blueprints for schools interested in moving forward.

The issue of assessments, as we saw in Chapter 8, is deeply divisive. What is of ultimate importance is determining what works. The current paradigm, in which the focus is on standardized assessments, is a failure. It puts undue pressure on teachers who are often at risk of losing their jobs if their students don't perform adequately. In extreme cases, this has led to cheating. Unfortunately, Black boys are often at the bottom of the pile and are the ones who are shortchanged by the strictures of the emphasis on assessments.

Though national standards and assessments to test whether students are achieving these are certainly necessary, we've gone over the top. Students are spending half the year or more studying for tests, and the tests seem to be cropping up with more frequency. We need to scale the testing way back. Tests at the end of the fifth, eighth, and 12th grades should be sufficient. Furthermore, tying test results to teacher salaries and promotion should be abolished.

For the Black boy in America, merely changing the educational system will not be enough. We also need to work toward a fairer policing and justice system. The first step should be to remove money from the justice and police systems. These organizations should never operate on a for-profit basis, which only provides incentives for police officers and judges to find and convict criminals. All prisons and detention centers in the land should be managed and overseen by the government.

All police departments should receive lengthy and powerful training on racism awareness, with periodic retraining. Whistleblowers in police departments should receive strong protections. Furthermore, all police officers on duty should be required to wear body cameras, with serious repercussions should those fail or be turned off. These measures have been demonstrated to lower the rate of violence, particularly toward people of color.

Parting Thoughts

This book has been, in some part, a litany of woes. We have looked at dire statistics on poverty and the graduation rates of Black boys. We have looked at the injustices they face on the streets and in the classroom. We have looked at the rates at which they are incarcerated and the rates at which they are held back in school.

All these things are true. I have seen firsthand how African American boys are treated in this country, and I know the despair that can set in. I have seen Black boys internalize the hatred and release it in destructive ways. I have seen Black boys fail. In the worst cases, they ended up on the streets, in prison, or dead. However, there is hope.

First, the United States has recently seen some African American male public figures who provide excellent role models for young Black boys. These include Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose *Between the World and Me* won the National Book Award; astronomer Neil deGrasse Tyson; Paul Beatty, the first American winner of the prestigious Booker Prize; activist senator

Cory Booker; and, of course, the first Black president, Barack Obama. For a young Black boy, simply the knowledge that it is possible to get into the highest political offices and academic institutions in the land is tremendously liberating.

Second, there is a growing call for change. The emphasis on standardized assessments is being reevaluated as parents and teachers alike are reacting against the testing culture. The Black Lives Matter movement is having an effect: more police departments are undergoing racism-awareness training, and the larger population is becoming aware of the racism endemic to our society and how it affects young African Americans. There is a growing awareness of the financial inequality in our country and a call for measures to level the playing field.

Finally, despite their grim history and the obstacles in their way, Black boys in this country have performed above trend for many decades. They started from a much lower place than other groups but are on track to achieve equality. If the trend continues, and if government and social forces work in their favor, they should be able to climb to parity by the middle or end of this century, thus reversing nearly four centuries of profound injustice. Note, though, that this will not happen unless they are given the necessary supports.

That’s where we come in. All Americans have a part to play in helping African American boys succeed. If you live in this country, you are part of a community. Let’s work together to ensure that the crisis among Black boys becomes history and that the future is one of promise, hope, and parity.

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