

**2007-2008
Leadership Seminar Series**

**The Education of Black Male Youth:
Understanding the Social, Emotional, and Learning Lives of black Male Students**

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BOYZ TO MEN?
Teaching to Restore Black Boys' Childhood

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Gloria Ladson-Billings is the Kellner Family Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction and Faculty Affiliate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the immediate past president of the American Educational Research Association.

Ladson-Billings' research examines the pedagogical practices of teachers who are successful with African American students. She also investigates Critical Race Theory applications to education. Her published works include *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*, *Crossing over to Canaan: The journey of new teachers in diverse classrooms*, and *Beyond the Big House: African American educators on teacher education*, and more than 50 journal articles and book chapters.

Her work has won numerous scholarly awards and in the spring of 2005 she was elected to the National Academy of Education and the National Society for the Study of Education

Many schools see teaching African American and Latino boys as their biggest challenge. The primary focus of these children and youths' educational experience is maintaining order and discipline. By the time black and Brown boys reach the 3rd or 4th grade they are no longer treated like the children they are, but rather like men.

In this seminar we look at ways we can teach to insure that we teach all children, particularly boys, in intellectually, socially, and culturally appropriate ways.

The way in which we discipline young black and brown boys encourages a “*Disciplinary Discrepancy*,” overuse of suspension and expulsion and dealing with discipline behaviors at the classroom (individual) level. The way in which we treat young black boys is to label them, push them out of the system, write them off and then adjudicate them quite early as we would adults. In this sense, young black boys are not given the opportunity to be young black boys, but are treated instead as invisible or as a stereotype of violent, misbehaving black men.

Prof. Billings described our response to this population as a love / hate relationship. We *LOVE* the young, black, male culture as one that is highly marketable (i.e. P. Diddy / Sean John). We *HATE* the images of black men we don't recognize (every day guys on the street).

We don't generally envision black males as successful. Our vision and support for them are not in alignment with how we treat them or what we expect from them. Prof. Billings shared statistics of how few black males graduate from high school and how few matriculate into two or four year colleges – and for those that do, how many actually graduate. The number is startlingly low with fewer than 8% having graduated from H.S. compared to 17% of Whites and 35% of Asians, and so we must look at the pipeline and question how they are treated throughout their school experience. For those that do get to college, we tend to ask them, “*What sport do you play?*” rather than “*What's your major?*”

For younger populations of students, Prof. Billings pointed out, we must look at cultural disparities such as teaching differences and the influence of stereotypes. We must question ourselves and our notions of what is acceptable and normal behavior; is an 8 year old boy acting up because he is black, male, or because he is 8 years old? Very often, a 5 year old precocious, smart black boy becomes bored, acts out, and gets labeled and referred to the principal.

Stereotypes later develop around how to “act” like a black boy whether you're black or not. The dress, styles, speech, and music along with the “attitude” become part of the culture and therefore the expectations. An unspoken rule develops around the pedagogy of poverty – “I'll show up and won't disrupt your class and you don't expect any work or deliverables from me.” This unspoken rule supports a downward cycle of lowering expectations of self and student.

Discipline directed towards black boys is reactionary and exhibits itself in the form of control measures rather than building up any self actualization or self management skills. Education becomes “feminized” regarding the norms and routines at school: Silence, stillness, respect without reciprocity, responsibility without freedom and compliance without cognitive engagement.

Professor Billings ended with inspiration for making change, saying that the only thing that will help towards this goal is to begin to make the change yourself. Demanding real work and effort from young,

black male students; teaching respect for self and others; and mentoring the change we want to see will add to educating young black males as the students they are and should be.

Q & A Comments

- The structures of schools add to the creation of disparities which are based on stereotypes. Help people to see the data – disaggregate it and see what patterns you observe. Based on the observations, what are you then going to do about it? We have an elaborate structure to police and monitor students – we need to create better, more effective systems. (Example of how lateness and detention are used to lock out or detain students vs. a more efficient system that would involve fewer staff, administrative hurdles and may actually support students in getting missed work done)
- The structures are set up to produce what they produce due to economics. Our society is based on knowledge workers or service workers. There is not a place for many in manufacturing or manual labor. We are not creating an educational foundation for the workers needed in today’s society.
- We need to cultivate a caring community, regardless of ethnicity. All teachers need to prepare themselves to serve all students – we need male, female, all colors to stand in front of our students. We need to know data – likelihood of dropouts per racial / ethnic background.
- We need to make Special Education (SPED) assignments from central office based on facts, not from within the building, so that people are making SPED decisions based on data - objectively – otherwise you have highly inflated #'s of SPED students.
- We need to “sponsor” and give guidance, especially to those black males who step forward and want to teach. They need to have a plan, goals – and sometimes need to cut ties to stay on track. (Prof. Billings referred to, *The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream.* by Drs. Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt with Lisa Frazier Page Riverhead Books, June 2002 \$24.95, ISBN 1-573-22216-X)
- Social workers / counselors must disentangle the kids from their problems. Start from a clean slate and encourage them to be who they are.
- Tie class success to individual success – individual success to group success. K-8 teachers can help instill in kids that it’s their responsibility to one another, that “our” success is everyone’s success.
- Civic responsibility is key: know your school board, who your local representatives are, and become engaged – take action! The only thing that changed the Jenna 6 is that people took action. The structure is easy, the symbols are difficult.

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