

2007-2008  
Leadership Seminar Series

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

Sponsored by  
The Delores Walker Johnson  
Center for Thoughtful Leadership  
at



and Wheelock College

documentation by Project for School Innovation



**TO BE MALE, IN SCHOOL AND BLACK**  
*Connections and Consequences of Teacher Beliefs and Practice*

March 13, 2008

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**Workshop Goal:** *Identify and discuss ways in which the outcomes of black males are persistently shaped by a culture of exclusion from high quality educational opportunities.*

*“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”*  
-Bell Hooks

Felicity Crawford began the lecture by noting some of the grave issues affecting black males in schools – including disproportionately high rates of court involvement, low rates of graduation, and overrepresentation in special education programs. These inequities are entrenched by location-based funding disparities, but also in the ideology of public schooling where a “culture of disrespect” holds students to low expectations, and blames students/families for institutional or systemic failures.

These conditions, explained Lilia Bartolomé, can be accentuated by the composition of our teacher corps, particularly the low percentage of African American and/or male instructors. Most teachers are trained in

methodology and curriculum (“teacher-proofing”), but inadequate attention goes towards the ramification of individual beliefs on student outcomes, and more importantly towards the structural ideologies that our teachers carry and implicitly express every day of their practice.

Professor Bartolomé continued by defining “dominant ideology” and discussing its impact on underserved students in schools. A dominant ideology, she said, is a framework of thought constructed and held by members of a society to justify or rationalize an existing social order. Such an ideology is so pervasive to be seen as “normal,” where competing views are relegated as illegitimate and even members of a marginalized group perpetuate its constructs. Because dominant ideologies *are* so socially pervasive (the “water in our fishbowl”), they are difficult, dissonant, yet essential for us to name. Professor Bartolomé identified three particularly harmful ideologies – social meritocracy, assimilationist thinking, and deficit orientation – that together “rationalize disrespect for subordinated students’ primary cultures and languages, mis-teaching them, and then blaming them for their academic difficulties.” Rather than confront these inherent and difficult truths, representatives of the hegemonic ideology force an assimilationist approach on nonwhite minorities, where social benefits are extended slowly, grudgingly, and ultimately to subordinate and socialize minority groups for second-class citizenship.

Confronted with harmful ideologies of “internal colonialism,” Professor Bartolomé identified the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire as instructive within a four-step framework:

1. Before you solve a problem, make sure you understand the challenge on a deep level. Many educational challenges are rooted in typically unacknowledged discriminatory ideologies and practices.
2. Comprehensively and historically situate – CONSTRUCT – the problem
3. DECONSTRUCT the problem and its oppressive ideologies
4. RECONSTRUCT with more humane, democratic practices and solutions, including effective counter-hegemonic orientations and pedagogical interventions.

Each of these steps, and teacher education in general, must be guided by deeply reflective action – a cyclical praxis between theory and practice.

Paula Elliott spoke of pervasive concepts of race where Black people are continuously viewed as “*the* problem,” and how these monolithic constructs must be unpacked to reveal dominant ideologies. As a starting example, Dr. Elliott asked members of the audience to raise their hands if their immediate conception of “race” refers to skin color, genetics, biology, etc (~80% raised their hands). The biological perception of race, Dr. Elliott said, has been used to drive U.S. cultural norms based on the “rationality” of science. However, biology constrains race to a fundamental nature, and casts blacks as an inferior group, while precluding other aspects of an individual’s identity (for instance, Haitian kids are pressured to be Black like Black kids...no room to be Haitian). Another common conception of race, said Dr. Elliott, is “colorblindness,” which renders race invisible, without consequence, and impossible to act upon – swept under the rug.

Felicity Crawford explained to the audience some results from a qualitative study she conducted on White teachers in urban MA high schools. Some of the issues she diagnosed included:

- ◆ Deficit and classist ideology on the part of White special education teachers who have often taught for 25+ years and consider themselves colorblind, yet view their minority students as unteachable due to life factors outside of school that overwhelm any classroom inputs
- ◆ These deficit, classist, and racist ideologies – messages of deficiency – repeat themselves in teacher conversations and augur the acceptability of failure for minority students
- ◆ White teachers who facilitate physical and mental absence on the part of their students, both of which degrade and diminish

Paula Elliott spoke briefly on “mapping the terrain” for teacher training. How prepared are teachers to critique previous assumptions of meritocracy, deficit thinking, assimilationalist ideals, and racist/classist ideologies? she asked. It is important that teachers look within their own stories to find values, knowledge, and experience that influence their ability to teach effectively and democratically. Dr. Elliott shared several sample questions, or “inquiry guideposts” for teacher training around the areas of personal beliefs, relationships, and passions.

Stephanie Cox Suarez shared several lessons from her experience in training effective teachers – a process she termed “sharing the wealth.” There are clear roles and expectations set by the culture of power, Professor Suarez explained, and her role as a trainer includes acting as a “cultural mentor” and “gatekeeper,” and providing the academic and professional “code” for what it takes to excel in the workforce. Prominent among this is the importance of high quality written English, said Professor Suarez. Throughout teacher training, it is critical to maintain the habit of praxis, and constantly reflect on the assumptions and actions that a teacher makes.

Nelda Barron added to Professor Suarez’s comments on teacher development. Professor Barron said she has found that many of her teacher trainees operate from an ideological framework that reflects dominant, often harmful mainstream belief systems. Teachers are products of their own socialization experiences, but implicitly impose their socialization onto students whether or not they share the same experiences. Therefore, Professor Barron said, it is important that teachers:

1. understand the significance of students’ cultural identities and lives
2. Become culturally competent through development of consciousness of how their own socialization affects their perspectives, signals, and actions
3. Stop dichotomized thinking about students as “others” whose cultures are inherently opposed
4. Become the cultural others in order to develop sociocultural consciousness of other worldviews

Professor Barron shared her research results on the ideological foundations felt by many White teacher trainees – below are selections that represent a starting point for de- and re-construction:

- ◆ Teachers non-judgmental, non-prejudiced, or open-minded about “diversity”
- ◆ Individualism and individual identity are more salient than social group memberships
- ◆ Race did not matter in their own lives, and this was proof that race was insignificant to any one’s experience
- ◆ Colorblindness was good, noticing/naming race was bad (and racist) and elimination of the racial categories/classifications would effectively eliminate whatever racism remained
- ◆ Racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression exist at the individual level and manifest themselves as individual acts of meanness
- ◆ It is a matter of personal disposition and character if one allows oneself to be “kept down” by people or incidents involving discrimination

Panelists briefly addressed audience questions, including:

- ◆ Children from supportive homes do well in school – the ideological part comes when there is sub-par instruction or subtle mistreatment, and the supportive home is blamed. Shift from the fact to how the fact is interpreted.
- ◆ Successful teachers utilize praxis of reflection and action, are clear and articulate about the lack of level playing field and the need to create one in a high performing school, and really identify with kids.

***Submitted 5/9/08: Project for School Innovation***